PART 1

The context of public relations

This first part of the book provides you with the background knowledge you will require to understand the role and purpose of public relations (PR) set against the broader business and societal contexts within which it operates. Chapter 1 discusses how public relations is defined in different ways and how it has evolved as a contemporary practice in both the United States and Britain. Chapter 2 discusses how public relations is organised as a management function inside organisations and how it relates to other functions such as marketing. We then turn to the role of the public relations practitioner in Chapter 3 to focus on what public relations practitioners do. In acknowledging PR's special relationship with journalism, we discuss the contemporary media environment in Chapter 4. Arguably, public relations is essential to modern democratic societies. In Chapter 5 we discuss the nature of democracy and how public relations plays a part in it. Examining the societal context of public relations from the organisation's perspective, Chapter 6 highlights corporate social responsibility. Finally, in Chapter 7, the emerging international context of public relations is introduced.

CHAPTER 1

Public relations origins:

definitions and history

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- identify the key definitions of public relations used in practice today
- recognise the debates around the nature of public relations and what it means
- understand the origins of public relations in the science of public opinion
- describe the key features of the history of public relations in the United States, Britain and Germany
- understand the social and cultural dynamics that led to the emergence of the profession in these countries.

Structure

- Public relations definitions
- Public opinion: justifying public relations
- Business, politics and public relations: country case studies

Introduction

What is public relations? And when did public relations begin? This chapter briefly reviews why it has proved so difficult to define public relations work or reach a universally agreed definition of what the job entails. It then outlines what is known about the emergence of public relations as a modern occupation, drawing primarily on the histories of the United States, Britain and Germany (further references to the European evolution are discussed in Chapter 7). The discussion of both definitions and histories reflects the social nature of the profession; public relations is a product of the economic and political circumstances of its time and evolves according to the needs of these broader environments. At the same time, its historical ties to advertising and propaganda continue to provide fertile ground for debate about its ethical and professional merit (see Chapters 3 and 15).

Public relations is now a global occupation and implemented in many corners of the world in different ways. However, written histories of public relations reflect the dominance of the United States on the academic field of public relations and tend to focus on its origins in the United States rather than in other countries. Little has been written about the emergence of the profession in Britain, with the exception of one comprehensive book by Jacquie L'Etang (L'Etang 2004b), discussed in this chapter. As a result, current histories of the profession must be regarded as socially and culturally specific. Moreover, and as L'Etang (2004b) points out, despite the current dominance of women in the profession (see Chapter 3), written histories tend to be his-stories, delivered through the eyes of the men who were at the top of the profession during its

emergence. Women who worked in public relations in its early years, even if they were few, would in all probability have taken a different view of developments. These issues should be taken into account when reading this chapter. There is much still to be said and understood about the emergence of this modern-day discipline.

Public relations definitions

Public relations (PR) is used in a huge range of industries and in each one slightly different skills and competencies have emerged among practitioners. As a result, there is no one universally agreed definition of PR (Grunig 1992; L'Etang 1996; White and Mazur 1996; Moloney 2000). The likelihood is that if you ask three practitioners and three academics to define PR, all six answers will be different in some way. In part, this is because the profession is still young. It certainly gives lots of scope for debate, as described in the following section, which outlines some of the most common views of PR among academics and practitioners (Cutlip et al. 2000). See Activity 1.1.

PICTURE 1.1 This chapter will consider the historical evolution of public relations and its practice. Debates continue as to whether this should include press agents such as the UK's well-known publicist Max Clifford. (*Source:* David Dyson/Camera Press.)

activity 1.1

Defining public relations

With a group of friends, write down your definition of PR. Now think about how you arrived at that definition:

- Is it based on your experience of PR and what you observe PR practitioners doing?
- Is it based on what you read about PR in the newspapers?
- Is it based on what your tutors have told you about PR?

Now compare your definitions:

- How different are they?
- What do they have in common?
- What are the differences and why do you think they exist?

Each of you will have different thoughts about what should and should not be included in the definition. See if you can agree on a common set of ideas, then test them on other friends and see how far they agree or disagree.

Academic definitions of public relations

Harlow (1976) found 472 different definitions of PR coined between 1900 and 1976. He built his own definition from these findings, offering:

> *Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, 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 opinions; 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 ethical communication techniques as its principal tools. (Harlow 1976: 36)*

This definition contains overall goals, processes and tasks of PR and positions the profession firmly within the organisation, as a management role. It covers most aspects of PR, but is somewhat long winded and other researchers have tried to simplify things by separating tasks from strategy.

Grunig and Hunt (1984: 6), for example, went to the opposite extreme from Harlow and defined PR in one sentence as 'the management of communication between an organisation and its publics'. Grunig (1992) argues that this definition allows for differences in practice between practitioners in different contexts, but still includes important elements, such as the management of communication and the focus on external relationships. Kitchen (1997) is even briefer with his definition, suggesting that PR can be defined as 'communication with various publics', although he does add to this by arguing that PR is an important management function and has a strategic role to play.

Other definitions focus on 'ideal' communications practices: two-way communications and building positive relationships between organisations and their publics. Some include its strategic importance to organisations and recognise its influence on reputation (Hutton 1999; Grunig and Grunig 2000). Cutlip et al. (2000: 6) combine these aspects and suggest: 'Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.'

White and Mazur (1996: 11) offer a definition based on the goals of PR: 'To influence the behaviour of groups of people in relation to each other. Influence should be exerted through dialogue – not monologue – with all the different corporate audiences, with public relations becoming a respected function in its own right, acting as a strategic resource and helping to implement corporate strategy.'

Key debates on definitions

All these definitions highlight the fact that PR is about managing communication in order to build good relationships and mutual understanding between an organisation and its most important audiences (Gordon 1997). However, it is important to recognise that they do incorporate underlying assumptions that presume its main function is to promote the organisation's interests and some writers have objected to this. Botan and Hazelton (1989), for example, argue that such definitions tend to present a view of PR as a neutral communications channel and only partially reflect actual practice, in which the main job of a PR officer is to manipulate public opinion for the benefit of organisations.

If we look at the views of PR held by the general public, most people think of PR as a means by which people are persuaded to think or behave in a particular way (Kitchen 1997; Cutlip et al. 2000). Botan and Hazelton (1989), Kitchen (1997) and Cutlip et al. (2000) all emphasise that popular usage of the term PR is often a synonym for deception and that everyday understanding of PR is usually determined by the visible results of PR activity (e.g. media coverage). However, the idea of *persuasion* has been left out of academic definitions, despite recognition of its importance in the profession's history, as we will see later in this chapter (see also Chapter 14 for further explorations of persuasion). Some academics point this out and argue that we should explicitly recognise the fact that PR is biased in favour of commercial interests. They define PR in terms of its social effects. L'Etang (1996), for example, suggests that the narrow focus of traditional definitions, which begin and end with the interests of the organisation, blinds practitioners and academics to the social and political costs and benefits of PR.

Moloney (2000: 6) agrees with L'Etang that PR is too multifaceted to be incorporated into a single definition, but that its effect on society demands extensive investigation regardless. His view is that PR is about power and 'manipulation against democracy' (p.65) because it is so often used to support government and commercial interests at the expense of other interests. Insofar as he uses definitions, he suggests that PR can be defined differently as a 'concept' ('communications management by an organisation with its publics'), as a practice ('mostly dealing with the media') and in terms of its effects on society ('a category of persuasive communications done through the mass media or through private lobbying by groups to advance their material or ideological interests'). See Activity 1.2.

activity 1.2

Key debates

Why do you think academics disagree about definitions of PR? Is it because they don't understand PR or because they have different views about its contribution to society? Summarise, in your own words, the key debates between different PR definitions. How would you explain these definitions to your friends and family?

Practitioner definitions of public relations

Practitioner definitions of PR tend to be more based in the reality of the day-to-day job, often use the term 'public relations' interchangeably with other terms such as organisational communication or corporate communication (Grunig 1992; Hutton 1999) and often include concepts of persuasion and

PICTURE 1.2 The 1978 'Mexican Statement' has defined public relations as 'the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programs of action which will serve both the organization and the public interest'. (*Source:* Jon Arnold Images/Alamy.)

influence. You could argue that this kind of flexibility means simply that practitioners have difficulty explaining exactly what their job entails – and indeed, this seems to be the case.

In 1978, the First World Assembly of Public Relations Associations in Mexico defined PR as 'the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programs of action which will serve both the organization and the public interest (Newsom et al. 2000: 2). The definition offered by the Public Relations Society of America, coined in 1988, is similarly broad: 'Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other' (Public Relations Society of America 2004).

More recent definitions have been more detailed. In a recent survey by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), PR was defined as 'influencing behaviour to achieve objectives through the effective management of relationships and communications' (Department of Trade and Industry and Institute of Public Relations 2003: 10). This definition is an attempt to combine the idea of managed communications with exercising influence on relationships and achieving mutual understanding, to incorporate as broad a range of activity as possible.

The CIPR defines PR as: 'About reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics' (Institute of Public Relations 2004).

Some practitioners disagree with this definition because it leads with the concept of reputation and they do not believe this is the primary focus for PR programmes. However, the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) in the UK has also adopted the CIPR definition for use by its members (Public Relations Consultants Association 2004) and it is included in some UK-based text and practitioner books on PR (e.g. Gregory 1996; Harrison 2000; Genasi 2002). Given this consistency, we can assume that this formal definition is the one most regularly referred to by practitioners in this country (see Think about 1.1).

think about 1.1 Academics vs practitioners

Academics and practitioners have come up with very different definitions of PR. From the summary above, consider the following questions with a group of friends:

- What are the main differences between the definitions of academics and practitioners?
- Why do you think such differences exist?
- Is there a right or wrong definition? If so, why?
- Which definition do you think is most appropriate for PR and why?

Feedback Consider the interests of the people creating the definitions. For example, are they trying to build theories about how PR works or are they trying to simply describe what it does? Who is the audience for the definition and how might the audience affect what is included?

Public opinion: justifying public relations

The practice of using communication to influence the public is hundreds of years old, with its roots in ancient civilisations, including the Greek and Roman Empires. Throughout history, governments, monarchs and powerful institutions such as the Catholic Church have used communication and information to generate support for their cause among the populace (Grunig and Hunt 1984; Cutlip et al. 2000). But it was the emergence of the concept of public opinion that eventually formed the scientific justification for using PR and communications techniques in this way.

Nowadays, the term public opinion is used frequently in the media, by government and by PR practitioners almost without thinking. However, as it emerged from the philosophical traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was a hotly debated topic and the context in which it is used today only emerged in the early years of the twentieth century. The concept of public opinion became relevant in the mid-eighteenth century, accompanying the emergence of fledgling democratic states. Rousseau, the French philosopher, is generally credited with first coining the term, in 1744, and its use quickly became more extensive as discussions continued about how democracies should and could incorporate the views of the populations they were supposed to govern (Price 1992).

Two basic conceptions of public opinion have dominated the evolution of the term: public opinion as an abstract, *collective view*, emerging through rational discussion of issues in the population; and public opinion as an *aggregate view*, the sum total of individual opinions of the population governed by the democratic state (Pieczka 1996). There are limitations to both these views – for example, who is included in, and who is excluded from, the term 'public'? To what extent does the rational debate required for the 'collective' view really take place and does everyone have equal access to the debate? If not, then 'public opinion' may only be the view of a select number of individuals who bother to engage in discussions. Alternatively, if public opinion is interpreted as an aggregate of individual opinions, then what happens to minority views that are swamped by majority concerns? Where do they find expression?

Definition: *Collective view* of public opinion refers to issues that emerge through rational discussion in the population. One example of such an issue is the general agreement among opinion formers (e.g. health professionals) that obesity in young children is caused through poor nutrition and a lack of exercise.

Definition: *Aggregate view* of public opinion refers to the sum total of individual opinions of the population governed by the democratic state. One example of such an issue is banning smoking in public places. In the UK the views of the majority of the population, tested over time through polls, appear to be in favour of a ban.

Many writers have expressed concern about the inherent nature of the individual – more interested in, and persuaded by, emotional arguments and events than logic and politics. If the democratic state is supposed to take public opinion as its guide for what is important to the population, then an emotional public is not necessarily going to provide the best information. Finally, researchers on public opinion in the twentieth century expressed reservations about the ability of the public really to understand the complexities of modern democracies and argued that it was the job of communications channels such as the media to simplify politics and government so that the public could understand and get to grips with matters of importance to them (Lippmann 1922).

The end of the nineteenth and turn of the twentieth century saw a rise in interest in the social and behavioural characteristics driving publics and public opinion, while the philosophical debates took a back seat. Particularly important in this development was the emergence of social research techniques – and in particular survey research – that enabled 'public opinion' on particular issues to be defined and quantified. This also resulted in the gradual dominance of the aggregate view of public opinion over the collective view (researching an abstract concept on the basis of concrete individual opinions made no scientific sense and so the approach had to be rejected). As a result, public opinion nowadays is interpreted most frequently as the view of the majority and we often see survey statistics in the media that suggest we all think in a particular way about a particular matter (see Activity 1.3).

As literacy levels and the media industry have expanded in modern states, the ability to quantify public opinion through research has also opened up new routes for it to be influenced. While the idea of influencing the public to cater to the interests of governments and elites is not new, the challenge to do so became more urgent in the twentieth century as a result of concerns about the public's ability to develop understanding of complex issues on the back of their own independent research (Price 1992).

activity 1.3

Surveys and public opinion

PR practitioners often use surveys as a means of making a particular topic newsworthy. For example, you might see an article announcing the latest findings on levels of debt incurred by students taking a degree or the amount of alcohol drunk each week by men and women in their early twenties. Take a look at the newspapers for the past two weeks and find an example of a survey that has created some 'news' about a particular topic and consider the following questions:

- **Q** To what extent do the views expressed in the survey findings correspond to your own views?
- **Q** How do your views differ and why do you think that might be?
- **Q** Would you support governments or organisations taking action based on these survey findings (for example, making new laws to limit alcohol consumption or reducing student fees)? Why/Why not?
- **Q** Has the news story changed your view of the issue being discussed? Why/Why not?

Feedback

Consider the motivations of the organisations carrying out the survey (they are usually mentioned in the news article). What motivations might they have for being associated with a particular issue? What kind of influence are they hoping to have on general views of the matter being researched?

Mass communication methods, and particularly the media, offered ready-made channels to communicate messages about such issues in a manageable format to an increasingly literate population. Public opinion became inseparable from communication and, as we will see from the case studies outlined below, PR practitioners in business and government were not slow to understand this logic and take advantage of the rapidly growing media industries to put their views across in logical and emotional forms that could influence individuals who were fundamentally open to persuasion (Ewen 1996).

Business, politics and public relations: country case studies

Wherever PR is practised, its history is tied to its social, political and economic context. This chapter outlines the history of PR in only three countries: the United States, Britain and Germany. PR practices elsewhere are shaped and constrained by the forces that caused them to emerge in the first place. Therefore, the accounts in this chapter should not be treated as a definitive history of the profession, but as case studies of countries where PR has reached a recognised level of sophistication and professionalism. Accounts of public relations in other countries have been given elsewhere and students should refer to *The Global Public Relations Handbook* (Sriramesh and Verčić 2003) for an excellent starting point. For further discussion on the international aspects of PR practice, see Chapter 7.

The United States: private interests in public opinion

Many PR textbooks written by US scholars include a brief overview of public relations history in that country (Grunig and Hunt 1984; Wilcox et al. 1992; Cutlip et al. 2000). For the most part, they focus on the role of key companies and figures including Ivy Lee, P.T. Barnum and Edward Bernays in defining the practice and techniques of PR (Cutlip 1994). In addition to these texts, Ewen (1996) provides a useful overview of the broad social context for understanding the emergence of PR in the United States.

The first widespread use of PR in the United States was in the service of politics. Cutlip et al. (2000) chart the use by American Revolutionaries during the War for Independence (1775–1782), of techniques commonly used today, including symbols, slogans, events, agenda setting (promoting certain topics

mini case study 1.1

Early US public relations in practice

During the early nineteenth century, presidential campaigns included a press secretary for the first time and there was general recognition of the need for public support of candidates if they were to be successful. In the commercial world, banks were the first to use PR to influence their publics, while later in the century large conglomerates such as Westinghouse electric corporation set up their own PR departments.

to influence the themes covered by the media) and long-term campaign development (see Mini case study 1.1).

In the late nineteenth century, recognition of the social impact of poor business practices on the working populace in the United States led to the emergence of 'progressive publicists' – individuals and groups arguing through the media for social reform in order to counter the negative effects of enterprise. Perhaps the first to recognise the need for formal publicity in order to support a cause, they couched their arguments in rational terms with the intent to appeal to public opinion and generate support for their cause. The resulting '*reform journalism*', pressing for social change, gained momentum and became a real thorn in the side of businesses.

The benefits of the reform movement depended on your perspective; business leaders regarded reform journalism as '*muckraking*', overstating the case against business and ignoring much of the social good it provided. The fear was that too much reform journalism might incite social disorder. As a result, from these very early days, businesses used communication to try and counter this tendency and establish social control by proposing and communicating ideas through the media that would unite the public and stabilise opinions (Ewen 1996). Increasing levels of literacy, combined with the advent of mass communication channels in the form of a rapidly expanding newspaper industry and new technologies such as the telegraph and wireless, meant that media relations quickly became established as a major tool for both sides of the debate.

Definition: *Reform journalism* refers to journalists who opposed the exploitation of workers for the sake of profit and pressed for social change to curb the negative effects of enterprise.

Definition: *Muckraking* is unearthing and publicising misconduct by well-known or high-ranking people or organisations.

By the turn of the century a number of individual PR consultancies had set up, catering mainly to private sector interests trying to defend themselves against the muckrakers. Clients included railroad companies, telecommunications companies, Standard Oil and companies interested in lobbying state and federal governments (Cutlip et al. 2000). Communications, largely media based, tended to be practised by organisations in crisis rather than on an ongoing basis and most businesses hired journalists to combat media on their own terms. As a result, the PR practised was predominantly press agentry (see Chapter 8), using the media to influence public opinion (Grunig and Hunt 1984).

It was in this environment that Ivy Lee emerged as the first formal and widely recognised PR practitioner. Making his mark as a publicity agent for the Pennsylvania Railroad, he argued that businesses had to build bridges to a sceptical public if they were to establish understanding and buy-in to their practices. If they did not, their legitimacy would be called into question and their operations constrained more by public opinion than by good business principles. He put this into practice by opening up communications for the Railroad and being the first to issue press releases to keep journalists up to date with events (Ewen 1996; Cutlip et al. 2000).

Lee embraced the principles of accuracy, authority and fact in communications, formalising this in his Declaration of Principles in 1906. He suggested that these principles would generate the best arguments for convincing public audiences. However, corporations were slow to adopt this level of transparency and while their communications may have been accurate in principle, their practices were still shrouded in secrecy. Indeed, Lee's definition of 'fact' was frequently interpreted by him and his employees as information that could *become* fact in the public's mind as a result of a persuasive argument. As a result, 'muckraking' and the debate over reform continued (Ewen 1996).

The importance of communication was given two additional sources of credibility at the turn of the century, both of which eventually contributed to

the wider take-up of PR as a business function. First, increases in disposable income and disposable goods created a new category of public – the consumer. Consumers had a new and very personal interest in the successful functioning of business and organisations were quick to exploit the potential for uniting their consumer base through advertising and PR.

Second, social psychology emerged and gained credibility as the science of persuasion. It provided a scientific basis for the arguments in favour of using PR to create a general public 'will' by shaping press coverage of a particular issue. The underlying objective, echoing the original motives behind reform journalism, was to rationalise irrational public opinion through the power of ideas and argument.

Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud and regarded by many as the father of modern PR, was heavily influenced by social psychology and reflected this in his two books: *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923) and *Propaganda* (1928). Originally an arts journalist who used his PR career as a publicist for the arts, Bernays wrote books that were practitioner focused, case study based, backed up by insights from the social sciences into how the public mind could be controlled through persuasive techniques (see Chapter 14, p. 271 on persuasion). This combination of practical tactics substantiated by scientific argument was extremely powerful and an increasing number of practitioners, many of whom had gained expertise in propaganda during the war years and subsequently joined the PR profession, were heavily influenced by his ideas (Ewen 1996).

Bernays and Lee were not the only influential practitioners at this time: Theodore Roosevelt's sophisticated use of the press during his presidential campaigns left a significant legacy for subsequent political PR practice, while Henry Ford, Samuel Insull and Theodore Vail all implemented impressive public relations strategies for the motor, electricity and telecommunications industries (Cutlip et al. 2000).

By the 1930s, commercial, non-commercial entities and government routinely implemented PR strategies, and their popularity was enhanced by the multiplication of outlets as the newspaper industry expanded and commercial radio started broadcasting. Techniques became more sophisticated as social research, which neatly divided populations into manageable groups with predictable characteristics, enabled specific targeting of communications. Increasingly, images were combined with words to increase the emotional pull of rational arguments, an important aspect of communication that continues today (Ewen 1996).

However, the advent of the Depression in the 1930s, when millions of Americans lost their jobs and savings, again called into question the ethics of business and the degree of social good it provided. The myth of a prosperous America full of happy consumers belied the reality experienced by hundreds of thousands of normal American families forced onto the breadline. Perhaps not surprisingly, businesses communicated much less vigorously during this period – but it was not the end of PR. Under the leadership of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the federal government used communications to promote recovery strategies including social enterprise. Roosevelt focused strongly on personal communication, integrating strategic messages with the power of charismatic and credible leadership – a highly persuasive technique.

The result was a shift in public opinion towards an ethos of social good – a movement that businesses quickly realised they had to align themselves with to remain credible in light of such economic hardship. For the first time, companies joined together in industry associations and societies, in order to generate stronger and more unified messages promoting social progress as a result of free enterprise. Business, it was argued, was inherently in the public interest. Perhaps the most obvious demonstration of this was at the World Fair in 1939, which included representatives from all types of businesses, symbolised democracy and forged an idealistic link between business and the greater public good. The advent of the Second World War helped the business sector to recover further from the Depression and reinforce its positive image (Ewen 1996).

During the Second World War, PR was used widely by the armed forces and emerged as the discipline that could promote American interests and identity overseas. Wartime PR also made extensive use of advertising to generate popular support for the conflict, a combination still used today in marketing and communications strategies.

In the immediate aftermath of war, the overall theme of commercial PR remained welfare capitalism, rather than unfettered free enterprise. However, the origins of PR as an essentially manipulative discipline were never far away, despite this apparent nod to public interest. In 1955, Bernays published *The Engineering of Consent*, underpinning PR as a discipline that could shape and mould public opinion, rather than engage and have a dialogue with individual groups. Television, the ultimate visual medium with a correspondingly large capacity to influence viewers on an emotional level, increased the level of commercial interest in mass media and the manipulation of opinion once more dominated the PR industry.

In subsequent years, the PR industry was characterised by an increasing number of associations

TABLE 1.1 Key publications in the early years of American public relations

Author	Title	Year
Ivy Lee	*Declaration of Principles*	1906
Edward Bernays	*Crystallizing Public Opinion*	1923
Edward Bernays	*Propaganda*	1928
Rex Harlow	*Public Relations Journal*	1944
Edward Bernays	*The Engineering of Consent*	1955

promoting sector-based interests, the consolidation of the consultancy industry, increasing amounts of literature, including the first *Public Relations Journal*, established in 1944 by PR baron Rex Harlow, and academic training for the profession. Harlow was also a key figure in the establishment of the Public Relations Society of America in 1947. Table 1.1 shows key historical publications in American PR.

Britain: public interest in private opinions

While commercial interests adopted and drove the development of PR in the United States, it was the public sector, and local government in particular, that was the driving force behind the early use of PR in Britain (see Chapter 30). As noted in the introduction, little has been written about the history of PR in Britain, with the exception of Jacquie L'Etang's (2004b) professional history. Her book forms the basis for much of the discussion that follows.

In the same way as the business sector in the United States began to use public relations as a means of protecting itself against attacks from the reformists, local governments in Britain found themselves looking to PR techniques to reinforce the importance of their role in the face of potential central government cutbacks during the 1920s and 1930s. Local communities and businesses did not understand what the role of local government was and regarded it as a bureaucratic irritant rather than a valuable service. As a result, the focus of much early PR in Britain was on the presentation of facts to persuade the public – genuine truths about what local government contributed to the public good. It was assumed that the power of truth would persuade both the public and central government to be more supportive of local officials and policies. As early as 1922, the local government trade union, the National Association of Local Government Officials (NALGO), recommended that all local councils include a press or publicity division in their makeup (L'Etang 2004b).

While central government did not make so much use of communications strategies in peacetime, the development of PR was also closely linked to the use of propaganda during the two world wars. Truth, here, was not so critical but its sacrifice

box 1.1 Documentary film in UK public relations

Documentary film was one of the most popular forms of both internal and external communication in both the public sector and corporations between the 1930s and the late 1970s. Under the influence of Stephen Tallents, state-sponsored film units were attached to the Empire Marketing Board, the Post Office (GPO), the Ministry of Information during the Second World War and, following the war, the Central Office of Information. One of the most famous documentaries of this early period was *Night Mail* (1936) made for the GPO, scripted by the poet W.H. Auden and with music composed by Benjamin Britten. The nationalisation of key industries after the war led to other public sector film units being set up for internal training and external promotion. Examples of these are British Transport Films (BTF) and the National Coal Board Film Unit.

Corporate film units were connected to Dunlop and ICI, but it is the Shell Oil Film Unit that is regarded as one of the most celebrated of the Documentary Movement. The films were often released into cinemas and while many were indirectly related to the company's activities (Shell's first film was *Airport* (1934)), the themes were more general, thus exerting a subtle influence on the public. Another group of films made by the Shell Oil Film Unit were educational and unrelated to oil. These films covered topics such as traditional rural crafts, the evolution of paint and the environment. When film was replaced by video in the 1980s, Shell continued as one of the key players in the audio-visual communications industry.

Source: adapted from www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/964488/index.html (British Film Institute)

mini case study 1.2

Basil Clarke – Britain's first public relations consultant?

Basil Clarke was a former *Daily Mail* journalist who founded his own consultancy, Editorial Services, in 1926, following a career in several government ministries where he directed public information. Editorial Services was founded jointly with two practising consultants, R.J. Sykes of London Press Exchange (LPE) and James Walker of Winter Thomas. Basil Clarke is credited by some as the 'father' of PR in Britain, partly because of his government track record and partly because he drafted the Institute of Public Relations' first code of practice.

Source: L'Etang 2004a

was justified in light of the need to win at all costs. The need to unite a population under one cause did create opportunities to persuade using other messages and means. One of these was the British Documentary Film Movement, inspired by John Grierson, who focused on using film to educate the public on matters of public interest. Visual communications were thus used to present 'truth', in the form of a rational argument, in a compelling fashion (L'Etang 2004b). See also Box 1.1 (p.11).

The propaganda industry during both world wars spawned many post-war practitioners, individuals seeking a new profession in a world where propaganda was no longer required. In addition, many wartime journalists were left jobless once peace broke out and frequently went into PR. In the years following the Second World War, the commercial sector in Britain woke up to the possibilities of communication and the industry started to expand more rapidly. Almost 50 years after the first US consultancies, the first UK consultancies were established and in-house practitioners in commercial organisations became much more common (L'Etang 2004b). See Mini case study 1.2.

Perhaps because of the early influence of public sector bureaucracy, PR practitioners were quick to organise themselves as a group in Britain, first under the auspices of the Institute of Public Administration and subsequently as an independent Institute of Public Relations (IPR). The IPR was established in 1948 under the leadership of Sir Stephen Tallents – a career civil servant and a keen supporter of publicity and propaganda from his tenure as Secretary of the Empire Marketing Board in the 1920s and 1930s, where he used communications to promote the reputation of the British Empire and its products among its trading partners. As the first Public Relations Officer in Britain, he joined the Post Office in 1933 and then moved to the BBC in 1935. Throughout his professional life, he used the widest range of tools at his disposal to promote the interests of his employer to the public, including radio, telegraph, film and, of course, newspapers. He was also a strong advocate for recognition of the publicity role as a profession in itself, with a specific and unique skills base. This was reflected in the Institute's immediate role as a lobbying body to encourage recognition of PR as a separate profession (L'Etang 2004b).

The IPR also served as a body through which practitioners could share their expertise and establish standards for their rapidly expanding number. The vast majority of its founding members came from the public sector and subsequently set up the first interest group within the Institute, focusing in particular on the need to recognise PR as an important role in local government (L'Etang 2004b).

This early institutionalisation of the profession means that, in many ways, the presentation of PR in Britain has been heavily influenced by the efforts of the IPR as the industry body. Key themes emerging from early years of PR practice have permeated the approach taken by the Institute, including: the importance of truth as the 'ideal' PR tool; the conception of PR as a public service; and the potential for PR to be used as a means for promoting freedom, democracy and, in particular, the British way of life – this last being particularly influenced by institutions such as the British Council using PR in this way. In addition, the IPR conceptualised PR very broadly, specifically extending the definition of communications beyond pure media relations (L'Etang 2004b).

The emergence of PR consultancies in the 1950s, often based on editorial services and media liaison, confirmed the existence of PR as a distinct profession, separate from its cousins marketing and propaganda – although these boundaries were often blurred. Indeed, although the IPR was intent on maintaining a broad conception of communications in its definition of the profession, the reality was that the ex-journalists entering the profession could provide a unique, easily identifiable service on the back of their media expertise that did not overlap with advertising or other marketing disciplines and therefore served the profession well.

The IPR, dominated by in-house and public sector practitioners, had difficulty catering to the specific interests of independent consultancies. One particular concern included the maintenance of professional standards and reputation across a wide range of small organisations. In light of this, a specific consultancy association, the Society of Independent Public Relations Consultants (SIPRC), was created in 1960 and worked closely with the IPR. However, the SIPRC itself was poorly defined and eventually folded. Subsequently, in 1969, the Public Relations Consultants Association was set up and still exists alongside the IPR today (L'Etang 2004b).

By the 1970s, then, the British PR industry had established itself as an identifiable body with a national institute and increasing numbers of practitioners. Standards of practice, areas of competence and the range of services provided were all discussed and developed. With this institutional basis in place, the next phase of development was driven by commercial interests. A rapid expansion, particularly in the consultancy sector, took place in the 1980s and continued in the 1990s. It was initially driven by deregulation and privatisation programmes for state-owned companies under the Conservative government during the 1980s.

Deregulation opened up opportunities for private sector operators in two ways: first, as consultants to lucrative public sector accounts such as the NHS and, second, as professional lobbyists on behalf of the bidding companies (Miller and Dinan 2000). Privatisation during the 1980s and early 1990s of national utilities, including oil, gas, water and telecommunications, prompted extensive use of public relations consultants by government departments. Persuading the public to buy shares in the new companies required more than standard Government Information Service briefings to standard media. Sophisticated techniques were needed to create sound marketing strategies, build public perceptions of the value of the opportunity and then persuade them actually to buy shares in the new companies (Miller and Dinan 2000; Pitcher 2003).

These programmes were highly successful: by the early 1990s and the completion of the privatisation programmes, 12 million members of the British public owned shares (Pitcher 2003). Media headlines were generally positive and company reputations began on a high. The newly privatised companies were the first to recognise the value of PR and continued the use of consultancies after their initial flotation (Miller and Dinan 2000).

The knock-on effects of this for the financial sector were considerable. From now on, listed companies had to communicate with the general public as well as with the privileged few who had previously made up their target audience. Communications had to be simpler and reach a wider range of people. In-house practitioners – if there were any – turned to consultants for support and the new specialism of investor relations was born (Miller and Dinan 2000; Pitcher 2003).

Deregulation of professions such as law and accounting, as well as the financial services industry, also created new opportunities for the PR industry by prompting the companies concerned to market themselves and communicate directly with their customers. For most, the concept of talking to the 'man in the street' was unknown and the newly expert PR consultancies were able to provide valuable support and advice (Miller and Dinan 2000). Increasing numbers of mergers and acquisitions in these new markets have underpinned the growth of PR during the last two decades, with communications strategies often the deciding factor between success or failure (Davis 2000; Miller and Dinan 2000).

The growth in PR that these processes prompted eased off in the early 1990s, but the social and economic environment continued to encourage PR activity. The 1980s had seen the (right of centre) Conservative government consistently emphasise the virtue of individual rights over community responsibilities – home ownership rather than council tenancy, share ownership rather than taxes. By the end of the decade, this mentality had become embedded in Britain; private interests were automatically regarded as superior to social concerns. In this environment, PR was used by groups and individuals to justify their decisions by making their voices heard above the general cacophony of the market (Moloney 2000).

The key characteristics of this evolution are reflected in the nature of PR in Britain today, particularly in the debates around PR's use of truth, the ethics and morality of the profession, the justification for using PR in terms of mutual benefit rather than one-sided advantage and the ongoing blurring of boundaries between marketing, propaganda and PR. Moreover, the fluidity of movement between journalism and PR has also given rise to the ongoing relationship between the two professions – there is plenty of antagonism despite the symbiotic relationship. Also of interest are the contrasts with the United States, where commercial interests drove an early and clear focus on the principles of free enterprise, situating private sector PR clearly in the capitalist arena. Federal government use of communications during the Depression and two world wars also helped establish the legitimacy of PR and, combined, these factors resulted in much faster development of the formality, size and sophistication of the profession than was the case in Britain.

Germany: industrialists, politics and critique

As with most countries outside the United States, information on the development of the PR industry in Germany is not widely available. Baerns (2000) and Nessmann (2000) offer the most comprehensive overviews so far. PR-type activities in Germany emerged considerably earlier than in the United States or Britain and was accompanied by critical analysis from social commentators suspicious of its potential to dominate public communication. The dynamics that led to its emergence were similar to those elsewhere: industrialisation; new forms of technology; increasing democracy and literacy; urbanisation; and the emergence of the mass media (Nessmann 2000).

Nessmann (2000) argues that PR as an activity first emerged in Germany in the early eighteenth century, although it was not formally termed PR until the mid-twentieth century. Practical applications of media relations can be seen with the systematic news office of Frederick the Great (1712–1886), Napoleon's mobile printing press that he used to circulate favourable stories about his military campaigns and his practice of monitoring foreign news coverage to check how his image was developing abroad. State media relations can be traced back to 1807, while in the mid-nineteenth century German industrialists were already recognising the importance of the views of the general public as well as of their own employees as sources of social legitimacy in the rapidly industrialising economy (see Mini case study 1.3).

The German state also cottoned on relatively early to the value of PR, with a press department set up in the Foreign Ministry in 1871, the Navy commissioning its own press officers in 1894 and the first municipal press office set up in Magdeburg in 1906 (Nessmann 2000).

From an academic perspective, this early development of PR practice was accompanied from the mid-nineteenth century by an increasingly critical view of PR among academics, as an exploitative medium used primarily by political and commercial groups, even as the need for it as a source of legitimacy for such organisations was also acknowledged. At around the same time, a debate emerged in relation to the German media, about the separation of clearly labelled advertising materials from unbiased editorial contributions (Baerns 2000). This debate revolved around the need for the press to retain its credibility by separating advertising from journalism, so that its legitimacy as an information-carrying channel for the general public could be sustained. In fact, the debate continues today and Baerns (2000: 245) points out that as recently as the 1990s, the German press council issued guidelines that stated: 'The credibility of the press as a source of information demands particular care in dealing with public relations texts.' While Baerns points out that these statements have not necessarily led to a black and white distinction between advertising, PR materials and 'pure' journalism in the modern media, the existence of the debate does highlight the cultural dynamics that frame PR practice in Germany.

As in the United States and Britain, the First World War brought with it new opportunities for press relations and propaganda by the state and this growth in the practice and understanding of the discipline led to a corresponding flourishing of the profession in the post-war years. During the Third Reich, however, the sophistication of new PR techniques was relegated to the back seat while Adolf Hitler promoted the use of propaganda techniques and press censorship to cement his regime.

The term PR finally came into general use in the 1950s, when the influence of the American occupation in West Germany resulted in both linguistic and practical adoption of the term and its modern practice. Germany's professional PR associations were founded in this post-war period and the industry once again expanded rapidly in the newly democratic state.

mini case study 1.3

The first public relations stunt

In 1851, German steelmaker Krupp executed what was perhaps the first PR 'stunt' when it transported a two-ton block of steel to the Great Exhibition in London, an effort that generated significant publicity and recognition for the company across the world. Krupp remained at the forefront of communicative efforts among German industrialists, along with other conglomerates including Siemens, Henkel, Bahlsen and AEG. Each recognised the value of media relations, circulating reports about their activities to the media on a regular basis, while Krupp established the first formal press office in a German company in 1893.

Summary

The histories presented here highlight the social nature of PR. It is a profession that applies the value of communication to situations where it is required. In the United States, the private sector has been the most active force driving the development of the profession, while in Britain, first the public then the private sector have resulted in the industry we see today. In other countries such as Germany, different cultural and social dynamics affect the practice, popularity and implementation of communications and will shape the PR industry in different ways.

Perhaps because communications techniques can be so widely applied, definitions of PR are various. While the general principles of using relationship management and dialogue in order to exert influence on target audiences are evident in most definitions, controversy exists about other aspects of the profession – such as reputation management – and whether they are core to its practice. These debates are unlikely to disappear in the near future. Whether they relate to the relative youth of the profession, the fast changing world in which it operates and the correspondingly rapid changes in the demands made on it, or simply the complexity of the practice itself, the reality is that the social nature of PR will always mean that it differs from one context to the next. Practitioners need to establish the principles that are most appropriate in their personal and professional situation and operate accordingly. The chapters in this book outline some of the issues that they will need to consider: personal and professional ethics, the sector in which they operate, the specialism they choose and the audiences they target.

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