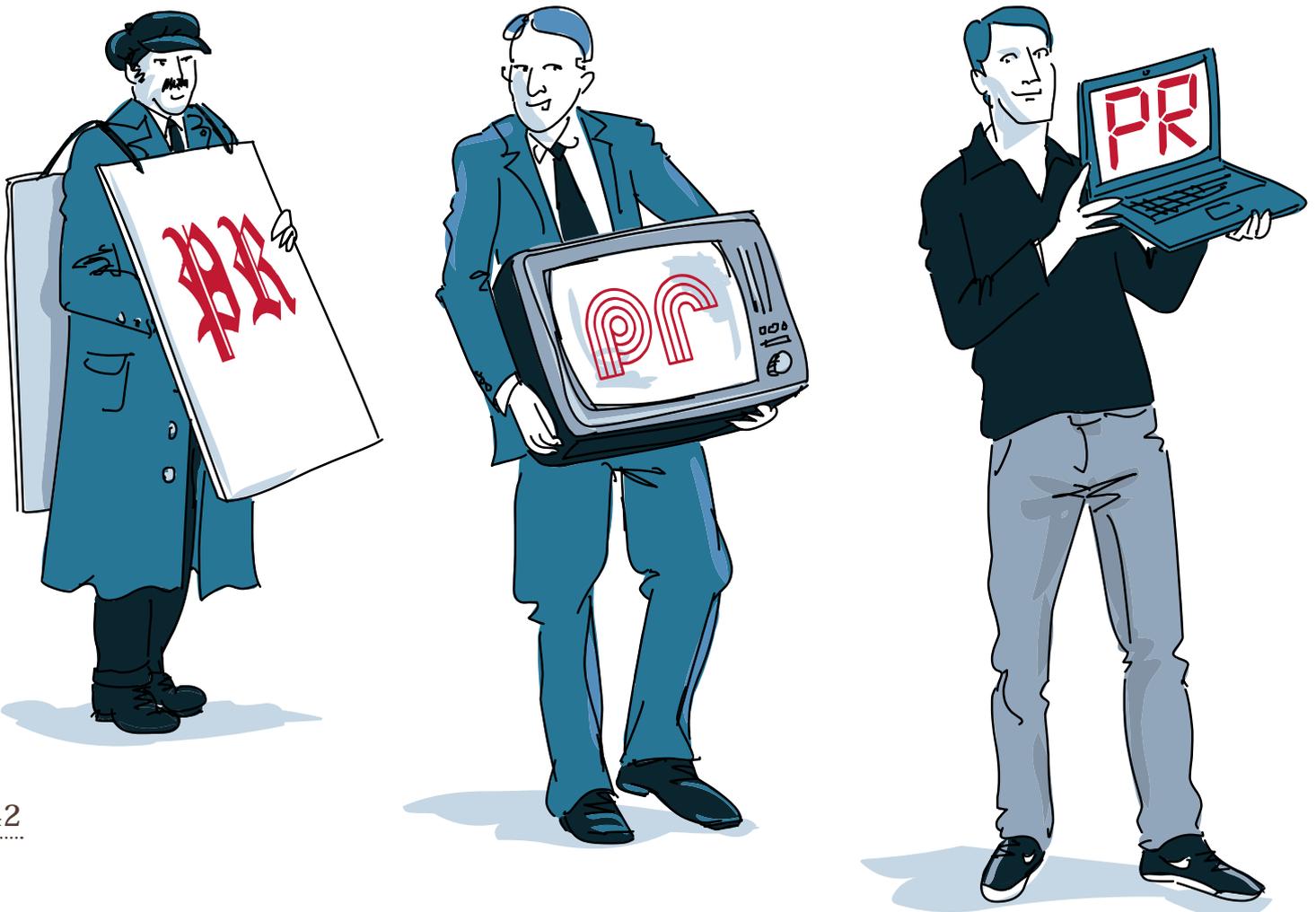


A (VERY BRIEF) HISTORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Tracing the history of public relations takes us from the American railroads of the 19th century to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the bursting of the tech bubble.

By Tom Watson



In the past few years, there has been increased interest in the history of public relations, spurred on by the International History of Public Relations Conference and a growth in academic research around the world. This has arisen because practitioners and academics alike are asking more questions about why and how public relations and corporate communications are practiced in many different ways. So where and when did public relations start? There are two, not very helpful, answers to this question. The first is that public relations-like activities (often called ‘proto-PR’) go back so far in history that the ancient Babylonians and Sumerians in what is now Iraq are often held up as instigators due to some messages scrawled on mud-brick walls around 3,000 years ago. But we will never know the exact answer and have to be satisfied that, for millennia, man has been communicating, negotiating and promoting. The second answer is that the term ‘public relations’ was probably first used in the US in the late 19th century. There have been several claims of first use and it is contested as to which person or organisation actually invoked the term first; but, for the sake of simplicity, let’s accept that public relations was first applied around the turn of the 20th century.

BORN IN THE USA? In the US, historians have pointed to public relations having two quite separate beginnings: the publicity and press agency of the circuses that provided popular entertainment, and the railroads, oil companies and public utilities. The circuses provided the route towards today’s ‘celebrity PR’

and product publicity while the less exciting but economically richer organisations have led to modern corporate public relations and corporate communications. The US historian Scott Cutlip identified a Boston publicity agency, The Publicity Bureau, established in 1900, as the first public relations agency in that country. It started with business clients and gained the account for the telecommunications monopoly American Telephone & Telegraph in 1903. The third to start was Parker & Lee, in which the famed pioneer, Ivy L. Lee, was a partner. The firm issued its Declaration of Principles in 1906 which accentuated a public ‘right to know’. Cutlip says it “was, over time, to have profound influence on the evolution of press agency into publicity and publicity into public relations.” Lee left in 1908 and went to Pennsylvania Railroad. He later worked as a strategic adviser for the oil magnates John D. Rockefeller Sr and Jr.

EUROPEAN BEGINNINGS In Germany, the industrial giant Krupp set up a news bureau in 1893 and there are other examples of organised business and governmental communication activities and operational units in the first 30 years of the twentieth century. In the UK, the Marconi company sent out its first news release in 1910. The first British public relations agency, Editorial Services, was set up in London in 1924 and the first holder of a “public relations officer” post was appointed in 1925. However, public relations and corporate communications in both countries did not take off until after the Second World War.

In the US, public relations became established between the world wars. Although the focus is often on the “great men” (pioneers like Ivy Lee, Edward Bernays, and Pendleton Dudley) the business application of public relations

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was mainly developed in major organisations like railway and transport organisations, oil companies and parts of government. Leadership came from major figures such as Arthur W. Page in AT&T who took a holistic view of public relations as being a whole-of-organisation set of behaviours that were not restricted to communications practices. In Europe from the mid-twentieth century onwards, there was increased emphasis on the development of public relations, especially through the formation of



THE STORY OF PR

 Looking back at landmark communications

national associations (Finland was the first on the continent, shortly before the UK) and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) which had very wide European influences in its formation in the early 1950s and on through its development in the 1950s and 1960s.

NETWORKING It is notable that the concept of international public relations was fostered primarily by Europeans, many of them reflecting the pain of war and seeking a platform for international understanding and promotion of democracy through public relations strategies and practices. The formation of IPRA was driven from 1948 onwards by Odd Medboe (Norway), Tom Fife Clark (UK), Johannes Brongers (Netherlands) and, when it started in 1955, had representation from France, Netherland, Norway, the UK, and the US. Belgium and Finland joined shortly afterwards.

Although IPRA's membership seldom rose above 1,000, it was an important influence in the spread of public relations as a professional activity across Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, it introduced the first codes of professional practice and ethics (The "Code of Athens") which was widely adopted from 1965 onwards.

Although some European pioneers in public relations looked to the US for ideas and guidance after the Second World War, it was the expansion of the major US consultancies – such as Hill & Knowlton, Burson-Marsteller and Barnet & Reef – outside North America in the 1960s that began the internationalisation of public relations in Europe. These consultancies followed their US-owned

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multinational clients as they expanded into the consumer and governmental markets of Europe and the emerging Middle East. Most started by creating networks of local consultancies and then acquiring them.

A NEW PROFESSION? Other important influences on the growth of public relations were the formation of European transnational companies, which led to the setting-up of corporate communication departments; and the rise of marketing-led or consumer public relations, with its highly tactical publicity style.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A short timeline

- ▶ 1893: Krupp set up a news bureau in Germany
- ▶ 1910: Marconi co. send out its first news release in the UK
- ▶ 1937: Finland sees first public relations association, called Propagandaliitto
- ▶ 1955: International Public Relations Association founded
- ▶ 1989: Public relations begins to flourish in post-communist countries
- ▶ Mid-90s: Internet spurs growth, which survives bursting of tech bubble

slow to follow. Indeed, most public relations training was provided by the national public relations bodies that sprang up in the 1950s and 1960s. At this time, public relations was not a graduate entry industry. Typically, journalists moved across into the information and communication roles. Women, even with university degrees, came in through secretarial and assistant positions.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, the field of public relations was mainly focused on media relations. This was a reflection of the journalistic background of many of the recent entrants and of their employers in companies and governments. This remains a major part of the practice today and is, arguably, one of the limitations to the recognition of public relations as a modern or new profession.

University education on public relations commenced in Europe in the 1980s. In the UK, the initial group of universities started teaching cohorts of aspirants in the latter years of the decade. Other countries were in parallel or followed soon after.

POST-COMMUNISM After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the former Eastern Bloc, public relations began to flourish in these countries. For some this development is seen as ‘new PR’ which arose from the introduction of democratic governments while others see it as a continuation of practices from the formerly socialist countries. They argue that many of the former governmental communications and propaganda people left their old jobs and became public relations entrepreneurs using many of the same techniques and contacts. There is a lively debate on this aspect of public relations history.

THE NINETIES In the 1990s, Europe led the public relations world in two areas. The first was the formation of the International Communications Consultants Association (ICCO) in 1988 which brought the world’s public relations trade bodies together and the second was the interpretation of the ‘Quality Assurance’ movement into the public relations field. One of the factors that had supported growth of public relations employment and budgets had been the formation of national public relations trade and professional bodies.

In addition to ICCO, the public relations professional bodies formed the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management late in the same decade. IPRA was behind the formation of the International Quality in Public Relations organisation which promoted quality assurance approaches to public relations. This was picked up in the UK and from there grew the Consultancy Management Standard, which was adopted by several countries.

Photo: Private

EXPANSION In the same decade – which started with a recession not unlike current times – there was rapid expansion of public relations in consultancies, government and corporations. One driver was the privatisation of governmental entities which fuelled further internationalisation of consultancies and corporate communication operations as companies moved rapidly into new markets through acquisition. Another driver was the rapid growth of ‘technology PR’ from the mid-1990s onwards. This brought new types of expertise and communication methods, as the “wirehead” technology PR practitioners used email and the nascent internet as communication and promotional tools. This was the period of Web 1.0 and the beginning of the biggest transformation of public relations practices and strategies since the end of the Second World War. Until then, technology change was relatively slow with fax machines only recently replacing telex and post. With Web 1.0, the pace of change accelerated.

Although “techwreck” and the bursting of the dot-com bubble around 2001 slowed the growth of public relations, it was only temporary as growth in public relations employment has continued to expand. For example, in 2004, it was estimated that 45,000 people worked in public relations in the UK. By 2011, it had risen about 60,000. Similar growth has been experienced across Europe. For example, the annual European Communication Monitor survey is sent to over 30,000 mid-to-senior level corporate communicators in 43 countries.

UP TO DATE So, by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, public relations has become a major communication practice in Europe and around the world. The very small beginnings in the US with the first public relations agency business in 1900 have led to widespread employment, extensive use of its practices and a burgeoning research and academic field. It’s a long way from a few circuses, steam railways and telephone companies publicising their activities to a very limited range of print media. |



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