Public Relations

Despite being an expanding industry, public relations (PR) is 'characterised by historical dissensus in the field about what the practice is, who it serves, and what its roles and responsibilities are'. This is borne out in 472 different definitions of PR identified by Rex Harlow, ranging from Harlow's own 87-word definition to a parsimonious 10-word definition provided by one of the leading international scholars in the field, Jim Grunig. In his widely-used co-authored text, Grunig defines PR as 'the management of communication between an organisation and its publics'. The Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) defines public relations as 'the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation (or individual) and its (or their) publics'.

The confusion surrounding the practice of PR stems from the fact that PR is not a single function or activity, but a 'field of practice' comprised of multiple types of communication activity. The most widely recognised PR activity is media publicity which is generated by liaising with and providing information to journalists (also called media relations). 'Information subsidies' provided to the media by PR practitioners are inevitably positive for their employer, resulting in the pejorative term 'spin'. However, public relations can also involve other communication channels, including organisation publications such as newsletters and reports, events such as launches and openings, videos, speeches and presentations, Web sites and, increasingly, social media sites. There are also specialised areas of public relations beyond media relations, such as shareholder or investor relations, community relations and government relations.

Further confusion about PR arises from the other terms are used to describe similar activities including *public information, public affairs*, *corporate communication* and *corporate relations*. While these terms sometimes refer to public communication practices with a specialised focus (e.g. public affairs is mainly focussed on relations with government – also referred to as *lobbying*), some organisations and practitioners eschew the title 'public relations' to avoid the negative connotations that PR has acquired. Nevertheless, 'public relations' remains the most widely used term for such public communication practices.

A simple way of understanding PR and differentiating it from advertising is the categorisation of three types of media: *paid media* (advertising), *earned media* (editorial publicity) and *owned media* (an organisation's own publications such as brochures and newsletters, events, videos, Web sites, blogs, social media sites, and so on). PR is the management function that focuses on earned media and owned media.

Using the PRIA's definition of PR as an attempt to cultivate 'mutual understanding', it could be argued that the public proclamation of the colony's founding and unfurling of the British ensign on the shores of Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788 marked the inaugural PR event in modern Australian history. Subsequent celebrations of this anniversary have incorporated the use of organised public relations activities to influence and galvanise public opinion and continue to do so through to the present.

The growth of the mass media provided new opportunities for PR initiatives to reach a mass audience, particularly in the second half of the 19th century. Politicians recognised the 'power of the press' and increasingly engaged with media in order to communicate with the general public. Commercial advertisers similarly recognised the press' power. While most used advertising columns, some blurred the line between advertisement and editorial content through 'puff' pieces and 'advertorial'. Community groups also looked to the media to promote their interests. The Salvation Army's Limelight Studios produced Australia's first

feature film in 1900. *Soldiers of the Cross* was shown as part of an illustrated lecture that included illustrative slides and music to spread the Christian faith and recruit new officers.

Initially functioning as collectors of news, press agents would become disseminators of views by the early the 20th century. Assuming the title of publicity agents or officers, their role would receive more attention in World War I. Without conscription, Australia's war effort became increasingly dependent on PR initiatives led by state recruiting committees. Their campaigns included posters, speeches, as well as an assortment of public events including processions and concerts.

After the war, publicity officers found work across government departments, from the Tasmanian Premier's office to the Western Australian State Publicity Department. Overseas, publicity officers in the High Commission in London continued to promote immigration and investment in Australia whilst the Australian Fruit Board promoted its produce to British consumers. As the interwar head of the Victorian Railways, Harold Clapp initiated public relations practices that went beyond publicity, including films and weekly radio talks. The growth of the Hollywood and radio entertainment in the interwar years provided additional outlets for publicity agents.

During World War II, the term public relations gained traction. The RAAF established its Public Relations Directorate in 1940 to bolster recruitment and to ensure that 'all news organisations, press, radio, and newsreel in each state had full access to all the available information about the Air Force'. The army and various government departments followed suit. The arrival of the American General Douglas MacArthur and his own PR unit in 1942 brought Australian PR practitioners into direct contact with the latest American strategies and techniques. Managing the flow of information to the media would prove to be a key lesson.

Dedicated PR consultancies emerged in the immediate postwar years. Asher Joel's decision to establish his own consultancy drew on wartime experience with MacArthur's PR team as well as his pre-war experience in promoting major NSW events. Wartime experiences and the political connections stemming from his PR work for the fledgling Liberal Party led Eric White to found Eric White & Associates (EWA). The formation of the Public Relations Institute of Australia in 1949 reflects PR's expansion, although its primary object of making 'public relations more widely known and accepted' indicates that PR still lacked recognition. The PRIA sought to improve practices by developing a PR code of ethics.

During the 1950s, the number of PR consultancies grew from three in Sydney to some 60 Australia-wide. Such expansion reflected the growing awareness of PR as well as the changing media scene. By the end of the decade, EWA had emerged Australia's largest consultancy with offices in each capital city, London, and Asia, demonstrating a growing use of PR. By the late 1960s, an estimated $12 million was being spent on PR annually. Notable campaigns included Commonwealth's decimalisation of currency and Made in Australia promotions and the staging of Lyndon B. Johnson's visit to Australia in 1966. However, Frank Packer's banning of PR people entering the *Daily Telegraph* indicated that PR still had a problematic reputation.

The PR industry in the 1960s increasingly expanded beyond publicity and developed a more holistic and sophisticated understanding of PR practice. PRIA publications examined practical PR issues from reconceptualising and segmenting 'publics' to embracing research. As well as gaining new competitors, the sale of Eric White & Associates to American giant Hill & Knowlton in 1974 brought Australian PR practitioners into direct contact with international practice.

The 1980s saw a dramatic growth in the size and scope of PR. In 1986 Australia was home to 270 consultancies. Large multinational agencies offered an integrated global campaign whilst publicists such as Harry M. Miller and Max Markson promised to capitalise on fame – however fleeting. In 1988 the top eight PR companies were earning an estimated $32 million. Government investment in PR continued to grow with the Hawke government investing heavily in media advisors. The number of media advisors employed by subsequent governments at both Commonwealth and State levels has continued to grow.

Today, PR is a substantial and growing industry in Australia. Commonwealth statistics revealed that there were 21,600 PR professionals employed in the private and public sector in 2010 – up from 18,700 in 2009 and 14,000 in 2008. The government's Job Outlook data shows that employment of public relations professionals increased 'strongly' over the previous 10 years and is predicted to continue to grow strongly to 2015–2016. Globally, PR spending was estimated at more than $10 billion a year industry in 2008–2009, growing at around 10 percent a year. Australia's PR industry is popularly estimated to be a $1 billion a year industry.

The PR industry in Australia is comprised of PR professionals employed 'in house' in companies, government bodies and organisations, as well as an estimated 1,150 PR consultancy firms available for hire on a retainer or project basis. Most of the leading international PR agencies have offices in Australia, including Edelman, Hill & Knowlton, and Burson Marsteller (owned by the WPP Group), Porter Novelli and Gavin Anderson (owned by the Omnicom Group), and Weber Shandwick (owned by the Interpublic Group). Additionally, there are many hundreds of locally owned PR firms, ranging from sole operators to leading Australian agencies such as Professional Public Relations.

Despite frequent denials by journalists, public relations has a significant influence on the media and on politics, as shown in a number of studies in Australia and internationally. A 2010 study by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism found that almost 55 percent of the stories in the ten leading Australian newspapers were the result of some form of PR activity. PR influence on content ranged from 42 percent in *The Sydney Morning Herald* over a five-day working week to seventy percent in *The Daily Telegraph*. This confirmed earlier studies in Australia which found between 30 and 70 per cent of media content contributed by PR sources and was consistent with findings from British studies on newspaper content.

Media studies scholars and journalists complain that PR has cluttered the channels of public communication with *pseudoevents* and publicity stunts. Australian political scientist, Eric Louw, also has critically reported on the 'PR-ization of politics' in which political debate is reduced to 'sound bites' and policy-making is managed by 'spin doctors'. However, PR practitioners and scholars argue that PR, when conducted ethically, is an important and beneficial form of public communication in which organisations ranging from corporations to government agencies, NGOs (non-government organisations) and not-for-profit organisations such as charities keep the public informed, engage with citizens in dialogue, and build and maintain relationships.

According to Best Practice models taught in university courses, public relations is a 'two-way street'. First outlined by Princeton historian and adviser to President Lyndon B. Johnson, Eric Goldman, in 1948, this concept is embodied in the 'two-way symmetrical' model of PR and Excellence Theory of public relations. This argues that PR includes representing the views of publics to management to orientate organisations to their environment, as well as representing organisations to their publics and seeking to orientate publics' attitudes to the

organisation. This process of co-orientation is best served through dialogue and building and maintaining relationships which are central concepts of modern public relations, according to scholars.

The Public Relations Institute of Australia requires its 3,000 plus members to comply with a *PRIA Code of Ethics* and also Australian PR consultancies registered through the PRIA have adopted a *Registered Consultancy Code of Practi*ce. Furthermore, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management which represents 80 PR practitioner bodies internationally has adopted a *Global Protocol on Ethics in Public Relations*. However, these codes and protocols are only voluntary. Moreover, many PR practitioners are not members of the PRIA. Critics therefore remain sceptical about PR, pointing to concerns about 'spin', ethics, propaganda, and power inequities.

Despite its use by a wide range of groups including environmentalists, community and consumer groups, charities and NGOs, PR is most used by organisations and government agencies with the deepest pockets and the dominant paradigm of PR practice is theorised as 'strategic communication' within strategic management theory which critics say privileges organisational objectives and discourses. On the other hand, proponents say public relations is part of free speech and even necessary in pluralist democracies to ensure representation of all views.

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