Propaganda in Contemporary Public Relations

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Abstract: The contemporary theories in public relations—the excellence theory (Grunig & Hunt) and the dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor)—claim two-way dialog communication as the tenet of the theories. Propaganda, as the original root of public relations, is refused by both theories. This paper aims to analyze whether any propaganda elements have survived in both theories and practices nowadays. Investigating propaganda and public relations concepts propaganda theorist Edward Bernays, three elements are found in public relations' practices today: 'manipulation,' 'goals oriented,' and 'one-way communication flow.' Despite the ubiquity of interactive media in public relations practices, propaganda elements are still commonly found, and two-way dialogic communication in social media is overrated.

1   INTRODUCTION

Public relations as one of the communication functions of organization, institution, and company has its root in propaganda. Edward L Bernays, who is known as the father of modern public relations, also put a foundation on propaganda theory. His idea of using the social psychologist approach to molding people's opinions on propaganda is also a basic principle in public relations campaigns. Today, public relations theories have moved in the direction of two-way dialogic communication and moving away propaganda. This paper aims to analyze the propaganda theory in contemporary public relations theory and whether any elements of propaganda have survived today. Research in PR communication on the website and social media is chosen to analyze because the characteristics of these new media—interactive, real-time, audience generated content, and connectedness—provide a bigger opportunity for two-way dialogic communication rather than traditional media. Besides, several claims about the power of social media that have improved public relations practices could be found in almost every professional publication today: it could wider the reach of PR messages, engage the public in two-way communication, and listen to their voice (Kent & Taylor, 2010).

The structure of the paper consists of the propaganda definition, propaganda concept according to Bernays and how it is different with public relations, today's contemporary PR theories—excellence theory (Grunig & Hunt) and dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor), current research in contemporary PR, the analysis on propaganda in contemporary public relations and the conclusion.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Defining Propaganda

In principle, propaganda is a persuasion strategy (and tactic) to change people's opinions, attitudes, and behaviors by using lies, deception, and hatred. Propaganda aims to get public support and acceptance while at the same time, make the public condemn the opposing party. The history of propaganda can be drawn from ancient Persian, Rome, India, and England to the birth of the Catholic Church, the discovery of the colonies, as well as the ratification of the U.S Constitution in 1788 (Cutlip & Baker, 2012. p.71-74).

The massive use of propaganda was not started until World War I (1914-1918) when both belligerent and allied countries used propaganda as the third pressure after military and economic pressure. Lasswell (1972, p.185-195), in his book *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, writes that successful propaganda depends upon the skillful use of means under favorable conditions. A means, for him, is anything which the propagandist can manipulate, and

a condition is anything to which the propagandist must adapt. There are four major objectives of propaganda in war: to mobilize hatred against the enemy, to preserve the friendship of allies, to preserves the friendship of the neutral sides, and to demoralize the enemies. To achieve the objectives, propagandists control public opinion by using significant symbols or to speak more concretely and less accurately, by stories, rumors, reports, pictures, and other forms of social communication (p.9).

For the propagandists, mass media is a very practical means of mass manipulation because its effects can reach a wide range and large population (Davis & Baran, 2006, p.75). They also believe that people are so irrational, illiterate, and gullible and "needed to be converted for their own good.

According to Lee & Lee (1979, p. 23-24), there are at least seven techniques of propaganda: "name-calling, glittering generality, a transfer device, testimonials, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon." Name-calling is the technique when a propagandist gives a bad name for an idea, people, or organization to create hatred toward the object. Glittering generality uses impressive and eloquent words in showing the "virtue" of an idea, people, or organization to create public acceptance and amazement. Transfer device associates action as part of a larger cause—church, democracy, or authority. Testimonial uses a prominent and important person to give a testimonial or support of the ideas. A plain folk is a technique where a propagandist justifies his/her idea in the name "of the people" or the "plain folks." Card stacking is the technique to present a select part of the story that uses twisted or false logical argument in order to make a convincing idea, program, person, or product. Lastly, the bandwagon is the propagandist technique to make us "contribute to his cause and follow the crowd."

According to Black (cited from Baran & Davis, 2006, p.78), there are six techniques that characterize modern government propaganda on war: 1.) Heavy reliance on authority/spokesperson figure; 2.) Uses of unverified abstract representation; 3.) A finalistic view of people; 4.) Cause-effect relationship; 5.) Overemphasis/underemphasis of the time perspective; and 6.) A greater emphasis on conflict.

2.2 Edward Bernays: Career and Personal Life

After World War I ended, industry expanded, and new inventions flourished that created mass consumer products. "There was a need for experts in advertising, marketing, public relations, and

fundraising" (Cuttlip & Baker, 2012. p. 79). Many war veterans who gained persuasion and propaganda skills in the war found a ready market for their talent, including Edward Bernays (1891-1995).

Before going to Bernays' conceptualization of public relations, it is important to know his career and personal life to understand how he developed the concept and how his ideas sometimes contradicted each other. Bernays was born in Vienna, Austria, the son of Eli Bernays and Anna Freud Bernays (sister of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud). Later, Sigmund Freud married Eli's sister, making Edward a double-nephew of the famous man (Cutlip, 1994. p.160-161). Freud's works on psychoanalysis later inspired and appeared in Bernays' works, specifically by emphasizing mass psychology as a social control technique.

His early career was as a Broadway press agent that attempted to get publicity from many newspapers in the country. In 1971, when the war broke out, Bernays joined the Committee on Public Information (CPI) and served as a technical assistant to Director of CPI, George Creel. CPI was an independent agency of the U.S government that sought to influence public opinion in favor of American involvement in World War I (Cardwell & Rubin, 2012). Through 80 years of his career, he experienced public relations work as a press agent, publicist, and later as a counselor. He was the man who made Americans eat bananas, American women smoke, and children wash with Ivory soap (Cutlip, 1994. p.159-160). He was also the man behind the U.S campaign as a democratic country, Lithuania's recognition of independence, and Procter and Gamble campaign over thirty years.

One PR tactic that he's known for is the staged event where he arranged glamorous, shocking, or sometimes amazing events and press conferences in order to get publicity and direct people's attention away from the "real problem" that the companies or organizations face. Even his title as 'the father of modern public relations" is later suspiciously analyzed by some scholars in public relations. Cutlip (1994), Cutlip & Baker (2012) and Moloney (2006) came to the conclusion that Bernays claimed the title himself.

2.3 Public Relations Concept According to Edward Bernays

"Public relations is the attempt, by information, persuasion, and adjustment, to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement, or institution" (Bernays, 1955, p.3-4). The term 'public

relations' consisted of three ideas: 1.) Information is given to the public, 2.) Persuasion directed at the public to modify attitudes and actions, and 3.) Efforts to integrate the attitudes and actions of an institution with its public. It is important for the company or organization to adjust and modify its objective in order to achieve its goals. PR, he argues, is an important tool in society that can help individuals or groups to adjust in everyday life.

Similar to the work of the professional in science, like doctors and engineers, Bernays (1951) proposed public relations as the scientific-social engineering that takes care of "consent, human, and human relations." He got the idea from the physical sciences and insisted that what differentiates public relations from some other work of publicity and press agent are "the research," the strategies planning, the use of themes and symbols, and the tactics to be used to meet the objectives. In Engineering of Consent (1955), Bernays structures those steps into a pattern that a PR must precede in his work that serves the same function as the blueprint in engineer works. The following pattern is:

1.) Define your objectives, 2.) Research your publics, 3.) Modify your objectives to reach goals that research shows are attainable, 4.) Decide on your strategy, 5.) Set up your themes, symbols, and appeals, 6.) Blueprint an effective organization to carry on the activity, 7.) Chart your plan for both timing and tactics, 8.) Carry out your tactics. (p.9-10)

In the same book, he stresses that PR must match up the campaign objectives and the storyline (themes and symbols) with "the fundamental human desires which can be satisfied by the campaign's success" (1955, p.16). Bernays said that it is important to understand human motivations and use it as the appealing factor of the campaign. In his other book—*Crystallizing Public Opinion*—he also emphasizes the importance of the psychological study of a group or individual. In order to steer public opinion and get public acceptance, public relations should know the "precedent, authority, habit, and all other human motivation" that influenced their opinion and use it to modify the messages and the channels.

The perfect example of the pattern is *Speak Up for Democracy* (1941), which he considered as the blueprint in campaigning for American democracy. It was written in the era of World War II, when the United States and its allies fought with Germany, Italy, and Japan. The content of this book is mostly about the United States' concept of democracy and how a civilian can live the value of democracy in his/her daily life. This book contains propaganda messages from the beginning to the end. Bernays

successfully builds a nuance that democracy is threatened by communist and totalitarian ideologies, and it will not survive if Americans do not fight for it. He wrote the book with a simple, clear, and persuasive style that even uneducated people could understand. He built his argument with examples from the daily life of an American and emphasized American industries of that time in automobiles, radios, telephones, and refrigerators. Basically, from all the examples, he was trying to build the pride of America as "the most powerful country in the world." After providing the argument of American pride, Bernays persuades the readers to fight for the democracy and provided a guided plan for whoever wants to "save the US democracy."

The structure of the guidance is quite similar to the guide book that public relations practitioners usually prepare for PR campaigns nowadays, whether the campaign is for commercial or social causes. The structure of the book consists of background, arguments, goals, objectives, the intended public and the contrary public, messages, themes, symbols, communication channels, media, strategies, actions/activities, and budget. His attempt in following the engineering approach when making a blueprint is to differentiate public relations with other publicist and muckraking works.

2.4 The Difference between Propaganda and Public Relations

How Bernays defined how public relations works is mostly influenced by his understanding and experiences of propaganda. There are parts in his writings (1941-1983) where Bernays uses the word 'propaganda' to refer to the work of public relations or 'propagandist' to refer to a PR counsel. Even though he stresses at the very beginning that "goodwill" is the goal that differentiates PR from propaganda, in almost every part of the concept, he still uses the "engineering of consent" as terminology to point at PR's works. Engineering consent, he argues, is related to scientific principles and sits at the very essence of the democratic process, the freedom of persuasion, and suggestion. The contradiction of his idea even stands out when he said, "We reject the government authoritarianism or regimentation, but we are willing to be persuaded by the written or spoken words (Bernays, 1951. p.160)."

Bernays's definition of public relations is, however, related to propaganda if we look into the plans he proposed in public relations—resources, knowledge of the subject, determination of objectives, and research. Even though he proposes

research in public relations actions, all of that research aims to "persuade" the public and win their acceptance. There are some propaganda legacies in his ideas of public relations activities, which are: the appealing themes of the messages, the powerful symbols, the creation of news, staged events that vividly dramatize ideas, and the uses of words, sounds, and pictures that are carefully organized.

As a public relations professional that gained his skills from the entertainment industry and government propaganda, Bernays believes that there's a need to steer people's consent in a democratic society to supplement the educational process. In *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, Bernays writes that there's a "uniformity of opinion" that the publics have upon many issues, and their reaction can be categorized into two perspectives. First, when the uniformity of opinion is the same that the public believes, they tend to call it an expression of public conscience. Second, when it contradicts, they call it insidious propaganda (p.69). He emphasizes this idea by saying, "The only difference between 'propaganda' and 'education' is the point of view. The advocacy of what we believe in is education, and the advocacy of what we don't believe in is propaganda." A public relations counsel must develop the ability and skill to estimate group reactions on a large scale. His work is not only to mold the actions of his client, but also the public opinion.

In this book, Bernays explains how an individual's thoughts and actions are shaped, and factors that influence people's opinions. According to him, an individual has a tendency to make a stereotype and judgment, and the less the knowledge one has, the more intolerant he can be. A public relations counsel must be able to discredit the old judgment by making the mass opinion against it or create a new one by making people favor the idea. This idea of public relations is a clear definition of propaganda.

Three decades after, in *Your Future in a Public Relations* Career, Bernays reflects on his public relations works and professions. He writes that the difference between PR and propaganda is in its function to serve two-way communication (instead of one-way communication) for public and private interest. His definition and scope of PR emphasize the importance of building a relation and mutual understanding between the organization and its public, but in further explanation Bernays still refers to his older idea of PR: as an efforts to integrate organization's attitudes and actions with its publics, to provide information, and to persuade the public to gain support for the organization.

He also warns about the ethical problem the profession might encounter, and he stresses that PR professionals should hold to personal integrity even before deciding to choose a client. He writes that a PR practitioner should not accept a client whose business will bring negative impacts to society, such as a tobacco company, although Bernays himself once gave consultation to the American Tobacco Company in 1928. What is interesting is the mentions an example of whether to accept a dictatorial government as a client, and he writes, "My answer is one should not. This is an ethical decision, not one of law… It denies the principle of human rights that our country and society stand for." In fact, his entire works in the early days were dedicated to giving advice to U.S. Presidents and governments to win public support. It seems that he was trying to distinguish public relations works from propaganda, but he could not draw a fine line between the two, except to say that propaganda is one-way communication, and PR is two-way communication.

The major conclusion of all Bernays's writing remains that PR has manipulated public opinion in favor of ideas, values, and policies that an organization or companies have favored. Consequences that PR inherited from propaganda are the manipulation of intended message, one-way communication flow, and uses of symbols and themes to appeal to the public emotion instead of factual content.

3 DISCUSSION

3.1 Public Relations Theory Today

Public relations theories nowadays claim their function is to serve the company or organization as well as their stakeholders. There are at least two main PR theories that claim PR works on dialogue and two-way symmetrical communications. First is the 'excellence theory' of Public Relations (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), and second is 'Dialogic Theory of Public Relations' (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002). The Excellence model has provided the underlying paradigm that has dominated much public relations theory for over 20 years (Phillips & Young, 2009. p.247).

3.2 The Excellence Theory of Public Relations

Grunig and Hunt (1984) identified four models of communication in public relations practices and

named it an "excellence model" of PR. Later, Grunig and Grunig (1992, p.88) claimed the models as the simplified representation of public relations practice in reality. The first model is press agentry/publicity in which PR uses lies and deception in the messages in order to have their messages published in the news media. The second one, they called the public information model in which PR functions as an "in-house journalist," and their work is to serve information to the public, especially the media. The third model is the two-way asymmetrical model, which PR practices the two-way communication but only intends to do so to have a more efficient persuasion. In this model, PR distributes questionnaires, and other tools to get feedback from the public and uses the result to make a better message and approach. The last one is the two-way symmetrical model, which is indicated by the engagement and relationship that the organization has with its publics. In this model, PR uses feedback to make better policies or regulations for the interest of both the organization and its publics.

Grunig's excellence theory has been influencing scholars in the public relations field and is considered as the ideal model in contemporary PR. Grunig drew an intellectual road map that, in its stages, distanced PR and propaganda and made public relations intellectually respectable, decently practicable, and legitimately teachable at public expense in the ideological and geopolitical circumstances of the 1980s. "He is the most influential thinker about PR since Bernays" (Moloney, 2006. p.3).

The first three models use asymmetrical communication that aims to "persuade" the public and help a company or organization achieve its goals. According to Moloney, Grunig uses the word "persuade" as a softer word to substitute for the word "manipulate." More recently, Grunig et al. (cited from Moloney, p.54) have clarified his position by saying that persuasion has always been part of the two-way symmetrical model and that persuasion is not rejected as long as it is symmetrical.

Grunig himself (2009) admits that PR practitioners, in some ways, are still using the traditional one-way communication approach in their digital media. Along with that, contemporary PR research using 'excellence models' shows the same result. The development of communication technology makes websites and social media as the potential place to communicate two-way interactively. A study in assessing companies' communication shows that corporations and nonprofits have strong preferences for using one-way communication on their web sites. These

organizations primarily rely on a one-way communications model to convey information online, as public information and press agentry statistically was used more often than two-way asymmetry and two-way symmetry (Waters & Lemanski, 2011). However, both groups moderately incorporated two-way communication practices, as corporations were more likely to use two-way research practices, and nonprofits were more likely to engage in conversations online. A study in social media using the 'excellence model' also shows that organizations are "primarily using Twitter as a means of sharing information instead of relationship building and pure symmetry was the least used model" (Water & Jamal, 2011).

3.3 The Dialogic Theory of Public Relations

Kent and Taylor's dialogic theory of public relations (2002) emphasizes public relations dialogue in order to build a relationship between an organization and its public, especially through the World Wide Web. They state that there are five features that a dialogic communication has: Mutuality, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; propinquity, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; empathy, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; risk, or the willingness to interact with individuals and public on their own terms; and finally, commitment, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with public. (p.25-29).

In websites, PR can cultivate the dialogic communication by providing useful information, making a website's interface easy to direct the public to the information, maintaining website features, generating return visits, and creating "dialogic feedback loops" which allow publics to give their feedback to the organization and get an organization's response in return (Spooner, 2009). Kent & Taylor (2002) argue that dialogic communication is a theoretical framework as well as practices guideline that public relations can use to do honest and ethical work. The implementation of the theory can be done from "the interpersonal, the mediated, and the organizational" level of relationship. Further, on research on a corporate blog, Kent (2008) found that effective dialogic communication through new media required sufficient knowledge and a trained public relations officer, as well as an intention to build trust with the public. Anonymous posts or comments in an

attempt to manipulate the audience will not create a relationship.

Current research on public relations communication through social media using 'the dialogic theory' shows that conversation is built mostly to provide information and to get public attention. Botree & Seltzer's (2009) studies on advocacy groups' communication on Facebook reveals that "dialogic outcomes are correlated with three dialogic strategies—conservation of members, generation of return visits, and organization engagement." Their communication strategies do not build mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders. The same one-way communication flow is also found in Waters et al. (2011) study on U.S universities' health centers' Facebook accounts. In fact, they are mostly using Facebook pages as "an extension of the web site or using it as a calendar to publicize upcoming events." The conversation between the organization and its public is only to provide useful information and conserving visitors. Briones et al., (2011) study on the American Red Cross social media infers that the challenge in building dialogue and relationships on social media is related to the staff resources and the time they spend on using social media. The other challenge is how to assure the organization management about the importance of social media in two-way communication and building the relationship. In the government sector, Soon & Soh's (2014) study on Singapore government communications reveals the challenges in dialogic communication are the commitment (time and resources) to pursue a dialogic communication with citizens and the evaluation method of assessing public engagement on specific issues.

3.4 The elements of Propaganda in Contemporary Public Relations

In his attempt to define public relations, Bernays, could not help but refer to the propaganda concept. There are at least three propaganda elements that can be found in the Bernays PR concept. First, the 'manipulation' element could be found in the aim to engineer public support, staged events, modification of communication channels, and emotional appeals to the messages. Second, the 'adaptation to the condition to achieve its goals' element could be found in PR research and well-planned intention. Third, the 'one-way communication flow' element could be found in the PR approach in using mass media. He confirmed the propaganda concept by saying that the only

difference between "propaganda" and "education" is the point of view.

The development of PR theories towards two-way mutual dialogic communication is represented by the 'excellence theory' and the 'dialogic theories of PR. Scholars who hold this paradigm dissociate 'manipulation' elements of propaganda in their definition of "ideal" public relations. They also create new terminologies such as 'two-way asymmetrical,' 'two-way symmetrical,' and 'dialogue' to separate the 'one-way communication flow' element. Grunig, an emeritus university professor and a former PR practitioner, even carried out several research and publications to prove that two-way symmetrical communication is performed by organizations and companies and is not just an ideal condition (Moloney, 2006. p.54).

However, current research in public relations communication using both theories has shown a gap between normative theories and practices. Claims of social media as powerful and effective tools in two-way dialogic communication are overrated because there's not enough evidence to support it. Conversely, current research shows that the majority of social media use is to provide information, which is nonetheless a one-way communication tool. The manipulation element lies in the press agentry model when PR uses websites and social media as an extension of calendar events, publicity, and conversation to maintain return visits. The last element, the well-planned intention, lies in the PR strategic plans to achieve goals and objectives. The challenges that obviate two-way dialogic communication are related to PR practitioners' perception of the profession, PR competencies, and the organization's intentions.

Although the development of PR theory has tried to leave the propaganda elements behind, the practices of PR are strongly influenced by propaganda; thus, it's too difficult to distinguish them. In a government context, it will be more difficult and complicated to draw a line between non-partisan public relations and a propaganda apparatus (Ni, 2003; Gelders & Ihlen, 2010). The only difference is PR now is doing the "talk" or "conversation," making interaction, and responding to the issues against them. After decades of developments, "PR, eventually, is weak propaganda (Moloney, 2006)."

4 CONCLUSIONS

Bernays's definition of public relations eventually is not different from public propaganda. This is not

surprising as he gained knowledge and persuasion skills from the entertainment industry and government propaganda. The main idea of public relations is to mold public opinion and behaviors by manipulating a human's basic motives and desires. Besides manipulations, other propaganda elements in Bernay's concept of PR are the well-planned intention and one-way communication flow. Propaganda legacies in Bernays' ideas of public relations are the appealing themes of the messages, the powerful symbols, the creation of news, staged events that vividly dramatize ideas, and the uses of words, sounds, and pictures that are carefully organized.

In contemporary public relations, scholars such as James Gunn, Michal Kent, and Maureen Taylor have conceptualized PR communication into two-way mutual dialogic communication. Unfortunately, the models are still normative because current research has shown a lack of two-way dialogic communication in PR practices nowadays, specifically in the website and social media platforms.

In conclusion, three fundamental elements in public relations—manipulation, well-planned intention, and one-way communication flow—are still found and commonly practiced in public relations today.

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