

INTERNATIONAL HISTORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS CONFERENCE 2013

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KEYNOTE PAPER - by Professor Tom Watson, Bournemouth University & Chair of the International History of Public Relations Conference **SLIDE 1**

May I add my welcome to delegates. I hope you enjoy the conference and find it stimulating and challenging. I also ask for your indulgence for allowing the Conference Chair to give the opening address. It's now more than five years since the formative stages of the conference began and it's time for a Report Card. So I am very pleased that some who helped shape it are participating over the next two days: in particular, Anne Gregory, Ray Hiebert, Don Wright and Jacquie L'Etang all played their part whether through publishing articles, encouraging journal special issues, collegial advice and encouragement. Others like Richard Bailey and Gunter Bentele have attended each year and so benchmark the field's progress. Let's start with a round of applause for all of them. **SLIDE 2**

My motto when writing this keynote paper and an earlier incarnation came from the late Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev, who said in 1956: "Historians are dangerous and capable of upsetting everything". I apply this motto in an ironic manner, as I wish that public relations historians were more challenging than they are. I will address this "call to action" later. **SLIDE 3**

This is, of course, one of innumerable quotes about history. Another favourite comes from the Peanuts character Peppermint Patty who advised that "history should always be studied in the morning, before anything else can happen..." **SLIDE 4**

But let's get serious. There are reasons we research and write history. It may be "gossip well told" and offering a readable narrative to fill the hours on beaches or cold winter nights but the British historian John Tosh makes the case for applied history:

"We cannot fully understand the features of the present unless we see them in motion, positioned in trajectories which link our world with that of our forebears. Without historical perspective, we may fail to notice continuities which persist, even in our world of headlong change," (Tosh, 2008, p.141).

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In this address, I will survey the "state of play" in the history of public relations field. This will reflect on papers and keynote addresses delivered at the International History of Public Relations Conference, which was first held in 2010, and journal articles since 2008. Using these data, I will review historiography and scholarship.

The field, I will show, is trending from an initial eclectic, often descriptive, approach towards the more analytical and sometimes critical. This is changing the nature of this conference and of subsequent outcomes of publications in academic article and book form. **SLIDE 6**

I will argue for greater international and cross-cultural cooperation between scholars. This will help the field move beyond description and into analysis, and to reconsider the "Great Men" focus and Anglo-American leadership (e.g. Grunigian models) content of many texts and articles.

There is much evidence that Ivy Lee, Edward Bernays and, to a lesser extent, Arthur Page had less influence on the development of public relations practices in North

America than has been claimed. In creating a history of public relations, early scholars and the majority of introductory texts have relied too much on Thomas Carlyle's dictum that, "the history of the world is but the biography of great men".

It concerns me too that many developing country scholars apply Grunig's four models and Excellence Theory as frames to record and benchmark the growth of their national PR sector using these convenient but culturally inappropriate standards. It's also evidence of "western hegemonic public relations", which I will explore later.

The evidence is gathering for a genuine revision of the history of public relations in many countries which will show a less corporatist basis to the field's evolution.

I will review the emerging historiographic debate. Meg Lamme and Karen Russell's monograph of 2010 – *Removing the Spin: Towards a New Theory of Public Relations History* – will be considered, as will recent books, articles and presentations and articles from Jacquie L'Etang, Günter Bentele, David McKie, Debashish Munshi, and Jordi Xifra. Karen, Jacquie and Günter have all been keynote speakers at the PR history conference. Meg, Jordi and David are also regular speakers.

I will argue for a distinction between what I call 'proto-PR' which are public relations-like strategies and actions that occurred before publicity and public relations became discussed entities in the late 19th century, and 'public relations' itself. The exact boundary may never be defined but there were publicity, press agency and institutionalised communication activities widely evident in some countries from around 1875 onwards. I will conclude with suggestions on future directions of the public relations historiography field. **SLIDE 7**

So where and what is the field of public relations history at present? The data are the papers presented at IHPRC from 2010 to 2013 and articles published in a history of public relations special edition of the *Journal of Communication Management* in 2008 and in *Public Relations Review* from 2007 to edition 39(2) – the Public Relations History 2013 special edition published recently. These comprise the largest and most diverse set of papers available for the past five or six years. Recent ‘history of public relations’ sections or chapters in the proliferating number of public relations texts are omitted, as most are based on secondary or even tertiary sources.

The data set comprises:

2008/9: 11 articles (special JCOM edition)

2008-13: 7 articles (PRR)

2010: 33 papers + 2 keynotes

2011: 29 papers + 1 keynote

2012: 33 papers + 1 keynote

2013: 36 papers + 1 keynote

There is a total of 150 papers or articles and five keynotes

In the case of IHPRC, 131 papers have been selected from 252 abstracts (52%) and drawn from authors in more than 25 countries. **SLIDE 8**

In 2011, the conference was organised around six themes and these continue to be used for the initial categorisation of papers. The themes are (in alphabetical order): Historiography, History & Events, National Histories, Professional and Practice,

Proto-PR and Theories of Public Relations. This is a blunt instrument for analysis but gives a starting point for assessment:

Category	Number
History & Events	52
Professional & Practice	38
National Histories	26
Historiography	15
Theories of Public Relations	12
Proto-PR	7
TOTAL	150

You will note that the strongly narrative style of History & Events, Professional & Practice and National Histories lead the way. **SLIDE 9**

Moving on from these categories, the papers have also been classified in a three-part typology. To form this analysis, I developed the three classifications with assistance from Tosh's 2009 book, *The Pursuit of History*. They are Descriptive, Analytical and Critical. The Descriptive classification relates to history as the "reconstruction of the past" (Tosh, 2009, p.148). One of its features is the use of narrative, often in the form of a timeline or chronology. "Analytical" refers to the exploration of historical causes, motives and consequences that involves "asking the question 'Why?' (ibid, p.150). It also involves discussion of latent and active causes.

“Critical” research, in this field, is more questioning and challenging than the Analytical as it questions the essence of power and control and puts forward new or alternative views of historical research. It is not necessarily a full postmodern critique.

Classification	Number
Analytic	67
Descriptive	57
Critical	26
TOTAL	150

As we can see from the data sets, the picture emerges of PR historians telling stories and analysing them but the field’s critical faculties are not being tested enough, with 17 per cent of papers being categorised as Critical, using the Tosh/Watson typology. Now I am a qualitative researcher and it was an effort to get the totals correct, so let’s see these as broad trends rather than statistically accurate tests. I also hope that you will accept that PR history has moved beyond the “anorexic” stage used so vividly by McKie & Munshi (2007, p. 118).

Although the history of public relations is considered to be an emerging field, it’s not completely new. Looking back to the 1960s, Ray Hiebert was writing Ivy Lee’s biography, *Courtier to the Crowd* (Hiebert, 1966). In the 1980s, Marvin Olasky was turning out prodigious numbers of papers (Olasky, 1987). Ron Pearson started the 1990s with his “Perspectives on public relations history” article (Pearson, 1992) and

was soon followed by Scott Cutlip's two mid-decade tomes, *The Unseen Power: Public Relations* (1994) and *Public Relations History: from the 17th to the 20th century* (1995), then Stuart Ewen's *PR: A Social History of Spin* (Ewen, 1996) and Larry Tye's biography of Edward Bernays, *The Father of Spin* (Tye, 1998) finished the decade along with Karen Miller (now Russell)'s institutional history of Hill & Knowlton, *The Voice of Business* (Miller, 1999).

Since then, a biography of Arthur Page by Noel GRIESE (GRIESE, 2001), Jacquie L'Etang's *Public Relations in Britain: A History of Professional Practice in the Twentieth Century* (L'Etang, 2004) and the Miller & Dinan polemic, *A Century of Spin* (Miller & Dinan, 2007) have been published. Of course, many standard texts have a chapter on history and the Sriramesh and Vercic tome, *Global Public Relations Handbook* (2009), offers sketches of the evolution of national public relations sectors and relevant associations, but there wasn't a rising plane of publication until IHPRC started. At this conference, we will have 'five meet-the-author' sessions, which is a solid indicator that the publishing is beginning to rise again. Not all have direct links to this conference but I hope we have assisted the 'mood music'.

So that's where we are now – lots of stories which are very readable; some analysis; emerging interest in major publishing; new energy on the conference and journal article front. But there's not enough critical thinking.

But where does PR history go to? **SLIDE 10**

First, we need to consider the *other* experiences and *other* voices of public relations, outside the Great Men and North America. So much of the conventional history of public relations narrative is US-centric. Ivy Lee's Declaration of Principles, Edward Bernays' self-promotion of his opinions and Arthur Page's social science approaches

have been lauded in general PR texts, biographies and by their own words. L'Etang (2008) acidly commented that "US scholars have always tended to assume that activities referred to as PR have been invented by Americans and exported elsewhere" (p.328). This is evidenced in Doug Newsom's comment in a 1984 edition of *IPRA Review* that: "Public relations is an occupation, some would say a profession, of uniquely US origin" (p. 30).

There are other voices and experiences of public relations in Europe and elsewhere that developed separately from the US model. Let's consider the central European experience of Germany and Austria where two major nation states with overseas empires sat side-by-side and exhibited great political and economic ambition in the 19th century. **SLIDE 11** Austrian researcher Karl Nessman (2000) comments that there are problems in historical research in the field:

"If press offices are considered to be the forerunners of PR, then a historical view must start in the nineteenth century. If however, PR is interpreted as "relations with the public", then this is surely eternally relevant and PR is as old as human thought. In this case, PR would date back to Adam and Eve, to the point when people had to win over the confidence of others" (p. 211).

German historians refer to the reign of Frederick the Great (1712-86) whose officials managed attitudes to Prussia by circulating favourable items and suppressing bad news. Albert Oeckl, one of the pioneers of modern PR in Germany, identified the formation of a state-run information office in 1848. The thrusting German industrial groups such as Krupp, Henkel, Bahlsen, AEG and Siemens also "devoted communicative energies" (Nessman, 2000, p.214) from the mid-19th century onwards. In Austria, trade unions established a promotional newspaper in 1867 (p.

214) and, in Germany, the Foreign Ministry started a Press Department in 1871. Krupp was the first commercial concern to set up a press office in 1893, with other industrial firms following suit (Nessman 2000, p.213). Michael Kunczik (ibid, p.215) noted that the sociologist Max Weber was analysing the relationship between mass media and business by 1910 though investigation of the actual source of news items.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Germany and Austria were demonstrating many of the practice characteristics of public relations as we now know it. But were these practices being carried outward to other nations and communication situations? That's a potential field of investigation. As Nessman (2000) comments,

... this (first) developmental stage was not at all influenced by what was going on in PR in the United States ... One fundamental difference between the development of PR in Germany/Austria and the United States is that early PR activities in America were much more defensive in nature (e.g. PR in defence of and as legitimation for "big business" versus criticism in the investigative journalism of muckrakers). In contrast the early days of PR in Germany were characterised by active information work.

Thus the evidence proves that it is possible to speak of an independent tradition of PR in Europe. In other words, the form of communication known as PR is not an American "invention" (p.216).

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IHPRC has also sought to bring forward voices from outside Western Europe and North America. In the four conferences, papers have been presented on national

histories of Brazil, Finland, Hungary, Jamaica, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Latvia, the Philippines, Romania, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, and Vietnam. My object in mentioning these is not to praise the conference but to indicate how little we have 'scratched the surface' in seeking these 'other' or different histories. For example, despite much effort, no papers have come from China or India. One can imagine the UK bureaucratic influence on the development of India PR but what has formed the public relations experience in China? Surely, even the four Grunigian models don't apply there.

We need to encourage PR historians, many of whom are new to the field, to move from reliance on the four Grunig models and Excellence theory as the basis of analysis. Do they apply to Latvia, Thailand or Uganda when they have been developed as a normative theory based on North American experience? These models are, to use a term that I have borrowed from journalism history, evidence of 'western hegemonic public relations'.

My study of the formation of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) in the 1950s and 1960s found that western methods of public relations were considered as essential support for democracy through promotion of understanding between nations and as a barrier to Communism. However, unlike western journalism which suffered a backlash from the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1970s, the western hegemonic model of public relations moved serenely onwards and outwards as public relations became internationalised. It was legitimised in the eyes of many by the Grunig & Hunt models and Excellence Theory. That may not have been the proponents' intention but it has been the outcome.

Grunig & Hunt (1984) wrote that their four models could describe the history of public relations. McKie & Munshi (2007, p. 122) responded that “the situation of PR is unusual, if not unique, among communication disciplines, in deriving core historical and theoretical concepts from a textbook” (p. 122) and noted that much extant public relations history has been cloned from it:

The chapter acts as a classic myth of origins whose function is less to explain, or record, the past than to legitimise some contemporary, or future, activity (in this case best contemporary and future PR practice) (p. 123).

L’Etang (2008) argues that the Grunig typology is not appropriate for cultures with “different paths of historical evolution” (p. 319). More encouragement needs to be given to nascent historians to go to archives, gather interviews and data, and develop historical analyses. By applying a framework from a Western corporatist culture to post-Communist Eastern Europe or south-east Asia, a dangerous short cut has been and is being taken.

Another issue is whether the history of public relations should be divided into two time periods. The main category would be the study of the organised communication practice and theory of what we recognise as ‘public relations’. Taking into account the German/Austrian experience and that of the United States, this could start around 1875, some 140 years ago. By then, as Nessman (2000) indicated, there were examples of government and corporate communication activity similar to modern public relations being exercised in central Europe. In the US, there is evidence from Curtin (2008), Cutlip (1994, 1995), and the recent Lamme & Russell (2010) monograph, that utilities and railways were engaged in PR-like activities soon afterwards. There may yet be evidence that governmental and bureaucratic

information distribution was also under way in Great Britain and its colonies and in other Western Europe nations at this time.

Before then, there is much evidence of communication activity which had some characteristics of public relations. This has, however, often been deduced by *post hoc* analysis. There are numerous examples given which range from Adam and Eve, as ironically suggested by Nessman, to evidence from Sumerian walls, Greek rhetors, Roman emperors, early saints, crusades, and so on. I have contributed to this field through a study of the formation of a saintly cult in 10th century Anglo-Saxon England (Watson 2008). These examples are not public relations, because they were, and I quote myself, not “seen as strategically planned activity in medieval times and ... did not use the framing of language and accumulated best practice that are applied now” (Watson 2008, p. 20). They were PR-like but were not PR.

For some time, I have proposed the use of the term, proto-PR or proto-public relations. It is based on “proto” meaning “original” or “primitive” (OED, 2005, p.601) and draws to mind the term “prototype” – “first or earlier form from which other forms are developed or copied” (ibid). I suggest that this separation between proto-PR and PR itself will aid research and scholarship without diminishing interest in either category.

I now move on to discuss historiography. **SLIDE 13**

In addition to the McKie & Munshi (2007) chapter and the L’Etang (2008) paper referred to earlier, there have been three recent relevant papers or discussions on the writing of PR history, notably the Lamme & Russell (2010) monograph and papers and IHPRC presentations by Bentele and McKie & Xifra. **SLIDE 14**

Lamme and Russell researched the historical perspective of public relations up to the end of the 19th century. From this, they formulated a “New Theory of Public Relations History” with the catchy title of “Removing the Spin”. They argue against the progressive and upward phasing of PR’s development and state that PR did not conform to a “pattern of increasingly sophisticated or more ethical practices” (Lamme & Russell, 2010, p. 354).

This led to a conclusion that “it is time to remove the spin from public relations history” and accept that the use of the progressive model of public relations’ inexorable development, as fostered by Bernays, Cutlip, Grunig and others, “was an attempt to clean up public relations’ image” (p.356). Although Bernays stated that PR was undertaking an ethical progression, Lamme & Russell commented that it may have suited his purposes, “but it paints a false and misleading portrait of public relations” (p.356).

In her keynote address to the first IHPRC in 2010, Karen Russell’s theme was that PR historians must “embrace the embarrassing” if their research and writing is to be valid. So Lamme & Russell’s contribution to public relations historiography is that historians should be historians, not censors or promoters for public relations. The dominant model of managerialist corporate orientation of PR history set in a liberal democracy which exhibits increasing ethical and practice standards is also no longer valid. Coombs and Holladay (2012) made a similar point that the corporatist view of PR has been distorting and that by “alternatively grounding US public relations history in the work of activists, we open possibilities for re-imagining the field” (p.347). McKie & Munshi (2007) take a similar view, arguing that many of PR history’s accounts “are unique and unchallenged, or under-challenged, and in need

of pluralising with robust perspectives” (p. 119) and “align with a modernist perspective” (p. 120). **SLIDE 15**

My focus now moves to Europe and the work of Günter Bentele. In a 2010 IHPRC paper, he argued that two general directions can be distinguished in the last 45 years of PR historiography: 1) the Fact- and Event-Oriented Type (FEOT) and 2) the Model-and-Theory Oriented Type (MTOT) (Bentele 2010). The FEOT-approach describes facts in an historical order and, interpreting them, often focuses on certain personalities and their activities. Bentele argues that this research lacks a conceptual, social theoretical foundation. The MTOT approach reflects the conceptual basis, uses models and/or theories and is doing more than giving descriptions. This type of research gives social-scientific and historical explanations for the developments.

Here I paraphrase his argument for a theoretical approach that he calls functional-integrative strata. “Functional” means that PR historiography should be developed in a context of societal subsystems like politics, economy, culture, etc. “Integrative” indicates that it should be developed alongside neighbouring fields of public communication such as journalism and advertising. Stratification models (well known in philosophy, biology, psychology and the theory of knowledge) are models which can be used to describe different developmental and/or historical processes. An historically grounded stratification model can be used to describe the evolution of communicative structures, means and procedures. **SLIDE 16**

Bentele suggests that the evolution of PR can be seen as a succession of developmental strata starting with interpersonal communication and moving through public communication, organisational communication, PR as an occupational field through to PR as a social subsystem in a global perspective. Each stratum contains important elements from the earlier strata; no stratum ends, but passes over to the next stratum. The fourth historical stratum, in which PR emerges as an occupational field with specialised departments and typical instruments, has been developing in Germany since the beginning of the 19th century. The fifth historical stratum (PR as a developing social system) began in the 1960s. The fourth and the fifth strata together show seven historical periods of PR history in Germany, which can be separated by political, sociological and technical parameters.

Five Strata and Seven Periods of German PR history (Bentele 2009, cited in Bentele 2010)

Strata	Period
#5 Public relations as a developing social system: 20 th Century	# 7 Growth of PR research & science; internet, professionalisation, globalisation: 1995 – #6 Boom of professional field and professionalisation: 1985 - 1995 #5 Consolidation of professional field: 1958 - 1985 #4 New beginning and upturn: 1945 - 1958 #3 Press relations and propaganda in the Nazi regime: 1933 - 1945 #2 Consolidation and growth: 1918 - 1933
#4 Emerging occupational field: 19 th	# 1 Emergence of the field: mid-19 th

century	century to 1918
# 3 Communication of organisations: End of Middle Ages, Modern Age	Pre-history of public relations
#2 Public communication: Antiquity, Middle Ages	Pre-history of public relations
#1 Interpersonal communication: History of mankind	Pre-history of public relations

Stratification models (which deal with evolutionary problems) distinguish different strata by building up one stratum on each other and are, says Bentele, a good solution solving several theoretical problems for PR historiography. They should be discussed as a possibility to describe and explain human communication and PR history. He considers they could be the basis for national PR history models (distinguishing different periods), which can be developed and linked with different strata. The value of the functional-integrative strata model appears to be as an analysis tool that could be tested in different countries and cultures, then adapted for local use. Although Bentele argues the model could be the basis for a unified global PR-historiography, my view is that it is may be too rigid and rational for cultures outside the West. **SLIDE 17**

David McKie and Jordi Xifra, in their IHPRC 2012 presentation, called for a more radical view of PR historiography. It must move beyond conventional professional limits and occupational parameters, and take globalisation and environmental impact into account. Their broad approach was postmodern and called for the use of oral history to seek the “view from the “bottom up” or “from below” in order to get a glimpse of a past otherwise documented (Berkhofer, 2008, p. 41, cited in McKie & Xifra, 2012); consideration of the “products of history” such as visual and written

material and their influence on the writing of history; and the acceptance that history is not a fixed story but needs continual review and assessment. Echoing Karen Russell's motto to "embrace the embarrassing" mentioned earlier, they called for research into PR's role in the creation of national myths – "the invention of tradition" - and support for nationalism. These demonstrate the power of PR, but also its abuse. Whilst their paper did not propose a model in the highly rational sense of Bentele's functional-integrated strata model, they were adding a challenge to the existing historiographical situation of public relations. History, they concluded, is "increasingly liquid and is being refashioned and retheorised" (McKie & Xifra 2012). The corollary of their argument is for PR history to move beyond navel gazing at development of the profession and practice and move on to political, economic and social aspects of its strategies and outputs, especially amongst those who are traditionally unheard when documents are analysed and policies examined. **SLIDE 18**

I now conclude with my thoughts on future PR historiography, but not from a position of moral or methodological superiority. My research has largely been, to use my categories, in the descriptive or analytical mould. Here's where I call for us to "get dangerous". I have already implied that much of PR history has been "comfortable" for too long: showing inexorable improvement and lauding great names. We need a more analytical stance and to move from the corporatist attitude that has dominated to research the messy, complex world of communication and persuasion.

As well, we can apply a more critical view that involves "other voices" and considers the imbalances of power where PR has been applied to support dubious policies and propositions or to unbalance dialogues. Through an activist perspective, we can research how NGOs, citizen groups and communities used PR techniques to combat government and vested interests.

The PR history that I really admire is research that pulls the professional veil aside and gathers data from new voices. For example, the work of Dr Ian Somerville and colleagues at the University of Ulster who have conducted extensive oral history. They have done genuinely “dangerous” research by investigating the development of PR strategies by the IRA and Protestant Loyalists during the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’. Some of those interviewed are now members of Northern Ireland’s parliamentary assembly but others are still active in paramilitary organisations. Some remain “dangerous” people. One outcome of their research was the finding that the IRA did have a PR strategy (and interviewees used the term) that competed with the British government through media relations and events. It was increasingly sophisticated through hardly symmetrical communication. It was certainly not corporatist. I urge you to read Ian and co-authors’ research in the conference proceedings, the *Journal of Communication Management* (Somerville & Purcell 2011) and the recent edition of *Public Relations Inquiry* (Somerville & Kirby 2012). There’s nothing comfortable in these studies of public relations in action during a civil war, but it is cutting edge history with political and social dimensions.

We shouldn’t all put our heads in the lion’s mouth in to research PR history, but we can investigate challenging issues about governmental, corporate and NGO communication. **SLIDE 19**

My final suggestion is that we increase cooperation between PR historians. For instance, we should map archives available to researchers. From them we can undertake comparative studies across nations, cultures and organisations.

These, I believe, will get greater leverage for bids to research funding bodies (ARC, AHRC/ESRC in the UK, European Union programmes, etc) and also open up

opportunities to seek industry funding which, other than in the US, is noticeable by its absence. **SLIDE 20**

In conclusion, there is a new energy in PR history research and scholarship. Let's continue to develop the field:

- Push the boundaries – away from Anglo-American focus
- Separate proto-PR from public relations
- Avoid Grunigian analysis as an historiographic tool
- Seek the “other” voices
- Take a more critical stance; re-imagine public relations from other perspectives
- Be more dangerous; but also cooperate across borders.

Thank you for listening. I'm happy to take questions now and later over refreshments and in plenary sessions.

4750 words

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