

'Father of Public Relations' turns 100

Edward Bernays invented the press kit and is credited with coining the term 'public opinion'

By Tony Case

Few reporters and editors would argue that, for better or for worse, public relations has become a pervading force in the newspaper business.

The press release and obligatory follow-up telephone call from PR flacks have become as commonplace in the modern-day newsroom as computers and fax machines — some could even say a commonplace annoyance.

In part, newspeople have the father of public relations Edward L. Bernays, who has just celebrated his 100th birthday, to thank—or to blame—for this milieu; after all, he invented the press kit, and is credited with coining the term "public opinion." He also authored the book *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, first published in 1923, which remains required reading at many journalism schools.

Bernays, addressing the National Newspaper Promotion Association in Pittsburgh in 1958, offered a definition of his field, maintaining that "public relations is not word manipulation," but, instead, "adjustment to conditions by deed" and "information and persuasion." He went on to urge newspapers to "engage in industrywide, aggressive promotion"—or full-blown PR campaigns of their own.

Not that Bernays necessarily agrees with what public relations has come to represent to many newspeople, that is blatant manipulation and, in some cases, deception.

"As far as the public and the media are concerned," he recently told the *Ragan Report*, "the current status of public relations is dismal. Any dumbbell, nitwit or crook can call himself a public relations practitioner."

Bernays has long called for the licensing of public relations professionals to ensure ethics within the industry, and has maintained that PR people should be tested and required to take their own sort of Hippocratic oath. Such guidelines have not been instituted, however.

In its April 2, 1927, edition, *Editor & Publisher* reported that Bernays and a committee of 14 had sought "to

organize an association of press agents similar, to quote Mr. Bernays, to the American Medical Association."

In the following edition, it ran an editorial that read, "The newspaper fraternity must have received quite a thrill from last week's news, exclusively published in this palladium of liberty and progress, that the higher caste in press agency is proposing to organize as a profession, write a code of ethics, 'clean up the evil practices in publicity,' and in general make the fight for life as a united body, with such legitimate advertising affiliations as they may be able to form.

as the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center on the campus of Columbia University in New York are a testament to the influence of the Austria-born nephew of psychoanalysis founder Sigmund Freud.

At the Columbia gathering, the venerable guest of honor seemed to enjoy all the attention thrust upon him as he enters his second century, following decades devoted to molding public opinion about everything from soap to cigars.

Indeed, his client list reads like a who's who of American industry, politics, even history. As *New York Newsday* observed, "Edward Ber-

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"Far be it from Editor & Publisher to discourage such a move. It is high time that evil practices in commercial publicity were cleaned up and those of us who have been working at the job from the outside would show poor judgment to oppose any disposition to reform from within. Whatever evils may remain, and some of them to us seem inherent, after Dr. Ivy L. Lee and Prof. Edward L. Bernays and their distinguished colleagues have mopped up the stables, will be perfectly clear targets to shoot at. After the public relations experts have formed their union we hope to be able to write much more specifically and therefore much more fairly than we have in the past when dealing with the subject of commercial propaganda in news columns. For these and other obvious reasons we welcome the project with open arms."

Bernays' efforts have not always been received with "open arms," however. As the *Washington Post* reported in its recent profile, E&P once called Bernays "a menace" because he was so effective in getting his clients mentioned in newspapers.

In any instance, observances of Bernays' centennial by such groups

nays rose from publicizing Broadway plays to take on grander assignments that now appear entwined with history."

His achievements have been so significant, in fact, that *Life* magazine called him one of the 100 most important Americans of the 20th century.

Bernays has counseled the likes of broadcasting pioneers William S. Paley and David Sarnoff, industrialists Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, and U.S. Presidents Wilson, Coolidge, Hoover and Eisenhower. He has also opted to tell a few powerful individuals "no" when they sought his advice, including Adolf Hitler and Francisco Franco.

When asked at the Columbia luncheon about his perception of the current state of the industry he helped to create, Bernays noted that, while the Public Relations Society of America claims 15,000 members, the U.S. Bureau of the Census reports that a whopping 100,000 people say they are in the specialized business of public relations.

Bernays related that he was recently approached for advice by a young woman who, when asked what (See BERNAYS on page 34)

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she did for a living, told him she was "in public relations."

"I didn't ask you that," he replied. "I asked you what you did."

"Oh, I give out circulars on Harvard Square," she explained.

Bernays noted that the woman had every right to say she was in PR since, as noted, the industry is not regulated and practitioners are not tested or licensed. "If she had said she was a medical doctor, I could have called the police," he quipped.

As for the future of public relations, Bernays is optimistic.

"The practice of public relations," he told the Ragan Report, "if it's practiced correctly, will become increasingly important because more and more people are recognizing that their whole life's work depends on the public's understanding of it. As more people come into this country, public relations will become an increasingly important element of every successful adjustment of an idea or a company or a nonprofit organization with the public."

"At the same time, unless something drastic is done, there will always be the fear on the part of the true professional that a few people who know nothing about the work will cause the entire field pain. The public today doesn't know the difference between the legitimate, sound counselor on human behavior and the guy who calls himself a public relations counsel but doesn't know nothing."

As a result, people with disabilities may have to assume activist roles in order to get the attention of news media, panelists said.

Although there are disability stories such as access and employment that deserve attention as serious news stories, people with disabilities most often appear in the media as the subject of features, said Mary Johnson, editor of *Disability Rag*, a magazine focusing on news for and about people with disabilities.

"There are issues that affect the lives of people with disabilities that aren't being covered," she said, adding that features focusing on people

(John is an assistant professor at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.)

ng disabled America

ia face the challenge of change

with disabilities too often perpetuate "heroic cripple" or "pathetic cripple" myths.

Johnson said she feels that editors fail to cover serious news concerning disability because they mistakenly believe that readers accept stories about disabilities only in feature treatments. Issues that affect people with disabilities interest the general public, not just people with disabilities, she believes.

(See related Shop Talk at Thirty column on Page 40.)

Recent discussions of sexual harassment have reopened examination of discrimination and misunderstanding relating to women, but similar breakthroughs have not occurred for people with disabilities, added Johnson, who spoke in one session and served as moderator for a second panel.

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Susan LoTempio, lifestyles editor at the *Buffalo (N.Y.) News*, described the difficulty she has in getting coverage for hard-news disability issues.

"There is only one way editors will cover disability stories, and that's the sympathy angle," she observed.

She noted that a photograph published widely following the recent Texas cafeteria murders provides an example of typical assumptions regarding people with disabilities. Captions accompanying the illustration, which shows two men embracing, indicated in at least one newspaper that a man shown in a wheelchair was being comforted, but "How do they know the guy in the wheelchair was the one being comforted?" LoTempio asked.

LoTempio thinks that disabilities make editors uncomfortable, so newspapers will willingly cover telethons, medical breakthroughs, and

"gee-whiz sympathy stories," but at her newspaper disability issues did not get hard-news space until the Americans With Disabilities Act was passed and signed into law in 1990, she said.

LoTempio, who uses a wheelchair, said she has been the subject of feature stories with an angle that she described as "a wonderful crippled woman helping crippled kids."

One editor she met at a convention, in fact, counseled her against a newspaper career, suggesting that, because of her disability, she would never get a job in journalism, he recalled. She added that she has had four news editorial jobs since then.

Joe Coughlin, co-host of the Disability Network on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, noted similar problems breaking into television journalism. Citing statistics indicating that, in the next 15 years, only 23% of new job entries in media will go to white, able-bodied males, he said real progress will occur when people with disabilities are employed both behind and in front of the cameras.

Winberg of the *Toronto Sun* said she complains in her columns that government does not do enough to get people with disabilities off the public dole and into salary- and tax-paying employment.

"To my knowledge, disabled people are the only ones who would like to pay taxes," she remarked, adding that modern technology provides ways to circumvent disabilities.

Several panelists agreed that news media seem unwilling to confront these issues. LoTempio said newspapers prefer to avoid initiating controversy, preferring instead to report the comments of others concerning disability issues. "Get the politicians to talk about it," she suggested.

Johnson agreed.

"To make news, you have to have controversy. We aren't adversarial enough. We don't do the things that get coverage."

In a session looking into future media response to disability issues, Jack Nelson, an associate professor in the Department of Communication at Brigham Young University, cited the coverage given militant gay groups, and asked whether people