

Ivy Lee and Edward L. Bernays: Examining the Fathers of Public Relations

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Introduction

Who could be appropriately considered the fathers of public relations? This question can be difficult to answer since there are many examples of people practicing public relations in some capacity over the centuries. However, two names will often appear in these types of discussions: Ivy Lee and Edward L. Bernays. These two men have been called the founders or fathers of public relations and rightly so. In the following pages, Lee's and Bernays' origins in public relations, their contributions, their ethics, and their relevancy to today's field will be examined in detail.

Backgrounds and Contributions

Ivy Ledbetter Lee

A graduate in economics from Princeton University, Ivy Lee first began his career as a reporter for several newspapers: New York American, the New York Times, and the New York World (Morris, 2014). In 1903, Lee quit his reporting job and became a publicity manager for the Citizens' Union (Morris, 2014). Two years later, he and a business partner, George Parker, established a public relations firm called Parker and Lee. Thus Lee's career in public relations began.

One significant workplace contribution Lee made to promote public relations was during his time at the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT) where he took an innovative approach of communicating directly to the public through pamphlets, brochures, and posters (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2013). Lee used this approach so the public could have a close understanding of the IRT's work and policies (Wilcox et al., 2013).

Communicating directly to the public or maintaining open communication with the news media was just one of many contributions Ivy Lee made to the field of public relations. This approach can be seen when Lee was a consultant for the Rockefellers during the Ludlow Massacre (Lee's involvement in this incident will be later examined). Lee provided news bulletins so newspapers, journalists, and the public could be aware of the situation. Another contribution Lee made was the practice of factual reporting. Lee came from a journalistic background; he believed providing company statements based on facts were more beneficial than the traditional, biased publicity handouts of his time (Morris, 2014). The public would more likely rely on factual statements than the biased reporting of the day. Marvin Olasky (1987) writes, "He [Ivy Lee] was also consistent in his use of factual accuracy to more effectively mold perceptions" (p. 14).

Edward L. Bernays

Edward L. Bernays, who graduated from Cornell University, first started out as an editor but quickly found his passion in public relations. Together with his wife, Doris Fleischman, Bernays opened a public relations office after World War I (Encyclopedia of Britannica). As a nephew to the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, Bernays was greatly influenced by his uncle's work and this, in turn, affected his beliefs and actions in public relations (Encyclopedia of Britannica).

One significant workplace contribution Bernays made was when he worked for the American Tobacco Company. Bernays' approach focused on advocacy and persuasion to change people's perception and behavior (Wilcox et al., 2013). In the Torches for Freedom campaign, he

demonstrated how a simple publicity campaign could generate public discussion about certain customs and taboos (this event will be later examined in depth).

One contribution Bernays made to the field of public relations was defining public relations as an applied social science where a person could formulate campaigns and messages to change people's thinking and behaviors (Wilcox et al., 2013). Bernays viewed public relations as a two-way street that adjusted to information and persuasion (Colf, 2007). Up until Bernays, no one had ever attempted to define the profession of public relations. Another contribution Bernays made was giving public relations a scientific model of persuasion. He applied his famous uncle's, Sigmund Freud's, psychological theories to the systematic alteration of public opinion (Colf, 2007) by listening to the public and figuring out their inner desires and emotions (Wilcox et al., 2013).

Analyzing Campaigns

Throughout their careers, Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays were involved in several campaigns for their clients. Some campaigns have propelled the men to fame for their ingenuity and innovation in public relations. Two of their most well-known campaigns will be examined: Lee's involvement in the wake of the 1914 Ludlow Massacre and Bernay's contributions to the Torches for Freedom campaign.

Lee and the Ludlow Massacre

Ivy Lee's involvement in the wake of the 1914 Ludlow Massacre is among his most famous and controversial campaigns (Wilcox et al., 2013). In Ludlow, Colorado, miners on strike fought against the Colorado state militia on behalf of the Colorado Fuel and Iron

Company; the resulting deaths, including women and children, sparked more violence and casualties (Wilcox et al., 2013). Angry protest leaders targeted and blamed the company's largest stockholders—the Rockefeller family, who hired Ivy Lee as a consultant for the crisis.

Lee's first act was to advise John D. Rockefeller Jr. to not combat negative publicity with more advertising. Next, Lee visited the Colorado mines to research the situation and plan his public relation tactics by speaking with the miners, politicians, and mine supervisors (Wilcox, 2013). He also advised the president of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company to publicly thank the miners for their loyalty, kept tabs on news articles about situation, and convinced Rockefeller to visit the mines himself (Wilcox et al., 2013). Additionally, Lee distributed informational bulletins and leaflets among opinion leaders and journalists, but his activities were later called into question by critics, forcing his client and him to testify to the government about the accuracy of his news bulletins (Wilcox et al., 2013).

The result of Lee's involvement in the aftermath of the Ludlow Massacre was, according to many, the beginning of modern industrial public relations (Wilcox et al., 2013). Kirk Hallahan (2002) remarks, "The Colorado experience, particularly the Commission hearings, gave Americans their first glimpse into the growing importance of the emerging field of publicity and public relations" (p. 305). This resulting exposure to public relations can be considered positive because it made citizens pause and examine how public relations can greatly affect a widely-publicized crisis.

A good framing model for Ivy's participation in the aftermath of the Ludlow Massacre is the framing of actions where Kirk Hallahan (1999) writes, "Similarly, when individuals are reasonably motivated to act, or when question of foregoing losses or sustaining gains is not at question, public relations routinely faces concerns about how to maximize behavioral intentions

and actions by posing desired actions in the most advantageous way” (p. 226). Ivy Lee, faced with negative publicity for his client, sought to pose the most desirable actions (the company president thanking the miners, and Rockefeller visiting the mines in person) in the most advantageous way so the publicity would be positive, and save his client’s business and reputation.

Bernays’ Torches for Freedom Campaign

Among Bernays’ famous campaigns is the Torches for Freedom. In 1929, one of Bernays’ clients was George W. Hill, president of the American Tobacco Company, who wanted women to feel free to smoke cigarettes outdoors, which was taboo back then (Mostegel, 2016). After consulting a former student of Freud, A.A. Brill, Bernays cleverly decided to associate women smoking cigarettes as a sign of emancipation from a patriarchal society (Mostegel, 2016). He labeled the campaign as “Torches for Freedom” (Mostegel, 2016). With the help of his secretary, Bertha Hunt, Bernays had a group of American debutantes walked up and down Fifth Avenue in New York City, smoking cigarettes as a gesture of female empowerment and liberation (Mostegel, 2016). Newspapers quickly picked up the story, and while some people suspected it was a publicity stunt, no one mentioned Bernays or the American Tobacco Company as the instigators (Mostegel, 2016). The result of the 1929 Torches of Freedom campaign cemented it as a classic milestone in public relations (Mostegel, 2016). The result was positive because the campaign showed how a simple publicity stunt could generate attention and public discussion. Bernays took a societal taboo and turned it on its head in order to fulfill a client’s need.

A good framing model for this particular campaign would be the framing of issues. Kirk Hallahan (1999) describes the framing of issues as “a way to examine alternative interpretations of social reality” (p. 217). He goes on to write, “Issues can be framed as significant or insignificant to the public interest but more important can be defined in terms of how people should think about an issue” (Hallahan, 1999, p. 227). In the Torches for Freedom campaign, Bernays framed the issue of women smoking in public as a significant topic of discussion for society. He was basically saying that the public needed to think women who smoked were liberated feminists, empowered like their male counterparts.

Analyzing Lee and Bernays

There is no doubt that Ivy Lee and Edward L. Bernays greatly influenced the field of public relations. They are regarded as the fathers of public relations. However, these two men were not perfect by any means. Despite their significant contributions to the profession, some of their tactics toed the line of acceptable ethics.

Ivy Lee, upon opening his public relations firm, emphasized on disseminating accurate, truthful information to the public (Wilcox et al., 2013). His dedication towards factual information went against the practice of distorted and biased press agency of his time (Wilcox et al., 2013). However, his credibility was called into question during his involvement in the aftermath of the Ludlow Massacre. During the governmental hearings, several factual inaccuracies were found in Lee’s informational bulletins (Wilcox et al., 2013). Although Lee may have been careless about verifying the facts, critics claimed that Lee may have deliberately mislead journalists so his client’s, the Rockefellers, reputation would not be irreparably damaged (Wilcox et al., 2013). Looking back over the case of Lee’s role in the aftermath of the Ludlow

Massacre and the following governmental hearings, Kirk Hallahan (2002) says, “To his credit, Lee was an individual of character, who believed in the decency of humanity and had faith in the ability of people to think rationally and discern truth when given the necessary facts” (p. 300).

Edward L. Bernays dedicated himself to the field of public relations, propelling the field into a respected profession and giving the practice a scientific basis, but even he balanced precariously on the line of ethics. Some of his campaigns were controversial. Richard Colf (2007) admits, “Bernays preached, though he didn’t always practice, a unique definition of public relations designed to elevate the craft to the status of a profession” (p. 26). Bernays often emphasized ethical behavior in public relations, but his own actions contradicted his personal and professional code of ethics which was loosely constructed (Bivins, 2013). According to biographers, Bernays frequently focused on expanding his client list and his own reputation; this caused him to gravitate more towards the business sector where money and recognition were easily gained (Bivins, 2013). Despite his questionable code of ethics, Bernays earnestly believed that public relations could be more than marketing campaigns; he thought the field could pave the way towards a democratic society that smoothly functioned, operated by intelligent manipulation because the public was incapable of making rational choices (Mostegel, 2016).

Which man was more ethical? Neither are perfect examples, but after laying out the information above, Ivy Lee appears to be the more ethical practitioner. He firmly believed in reporting the facts to the public, allowing the masses to judge for themselves without press agents trying to do so for them. An ethical perspective for Lee would be the Kantian view where a public relations practitioner is obligated to report the truth to the public while maintaining loyalty towards the client. Ivy Lee tried to do both; he released informational bulletins (several

were later found to be inaccurate) to the public while loyally counseling his client on how to proceed after a terrible crisis.

Who should be held in higher regard? When one sets aside personal ethics and focuses solely on contributions, then Edward L. Bernays wins. According to biographer Larry Tye, Bernays thought bigger and bolder than his predecessors and peers; he was public relation's first philosopher and intellectual (Colf, 2007). He gave the profession a definition, scope, function, methods, techniques, and social responsibilities—all of which would greatly influence the field's future (Wilcox et al., 2013). An ethical perspective for Bernays would be situational ethics where there are no absolutes and the situation or context is the most important. Bernays focused on people's desires and feelings in public relations—a variable that always can change which allowed him to devise unique campaigns based on his clients' goals and the situation at hand.

Relevancy to Today's PR

Ivy Lee's and Edward L. Bernays' contributions are still relevant to the current field of public relations even after all these years. Their campaigns continue to be held as examples of groundbreaking and innovative strategies of their day. College textbooks, specializing in public relations, will at least mention their names in passing and will most likely examine one or two of their most famous campaigns.

With his journalistic background, Ivy Lee set the tone of public relations being factual and accurate instead of biased and exaggerated. This standard has helped public relations maintain a level of credibility with the public. Edward Bernays, nephew to the famous Sigmund Freud, elevated the profession to new heights by defining the field and applying scientific theories and measures to his campaigns; he envisioned public relations to be a model that helped societies to function better.

Lee and Bernays were not perfect. Some of their practices, campaigns, and ethical codes toed the line of decency. Modern practitioners, however, should take note of these men's actions and ethical beliefs and decide for themselves of how they should practice ethics in their own careers.

Conclusion

In the span of a short paper, Ivy Lee's and Edward L. Bernays' origins in public relations, their contributions to the field, their ethical practices, and their relevancy to the field have been explained and examined in detail. Both men have greatly shaped public relations into what it is today. While neither were perfect, Ivy and Bernays have rightly been called the founders of public relations, and their campaigns, theories, and techniques continue to be influential.

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