

The Image of the Public Relations Profession in the Print Media,
1980-1989

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ABSTRACT

Although public relations has been a controversial subject for the print media as far back as the early 1900s, there have been few studies that have addressed the profession's media image. This study examines how the print media portrayed the public relations field from 1980 through 1989. Using the words "public relations and practitioners" and "public relations and profession" in an on-line search via the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, 58 such articles were obtained from three American newspapers: *The New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. A content analysis resulted in three coded groups: favorable, unfavorable and neutral.

General findings revealed the overall public relations print image as favorable (24.1%), unfavorable (46.5%) and neutral (29.3%). In the study's breakdown of characterizations, "favorable" and "neutral" characterizations included three portrayals: like any other profession (20.7%); as an advertising, communication, publicity, or image profession (20.7%); and as a business with economic or political power or influence (12.1%). "Unfavorable" included four portrayals, as: deceptive (24%); immature, weak or superficial (12%); discriminatory (7%), and intimidating, harassing, or conflicting (3.5%). A significant number of the unfavorable articles were written not by journalists, but by public relations practitioners themselves. If this is still the case in a suggested follow-up study, responsibility for correcting the public relations' unfavorable image should be assigned to the public relations practitioners.

The Image of the Public Relations Profession in the Print Media, 1980-1989

Introduction

Since the start of the 1900s, the term “public relations” has assumed the unofficial status of a *profession*, granting it a certain amount of respectability, while at the same time making it vulnerable to oversight and criticism, and opening it up to questions about its practitioners’ behaviors, especially in the print media. Even now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the relationship between public relations people and journalists is still ambiguous.

At first, several factors encouraged journalists to go into the public relations field. Among these factors were: changes in the newspaper business that adversely affected the careers of many journalists, the growth of giant corporations, greater attention to public opinion, and a new corporate need to communicate with more audiences.¹ Singly, and in combination, these factors adversely affected the careers of many journalists. In fact, generally, the early public relations practitioners were former newspapermen who faced the decision to switch professions, but in doing so, created a connection that resulted in an ambivalent relationship between the public relations practitioners and the journalists. As Hallahan wrote, “Journalism and public relations are inextricably a love-hate relationship.”²

Early on, journalists accused public relations practitioners of manipulating the mass media to favor business interests.³ For decades, public relations practitioners have not been able to erase that early negative image. Some public relations practitioners have evaded those accusations and have even been unwilling to face the image question, sometimes using other terms to describe their profession, like “public communication” or

¹ Alan R Raucher, “Public Relations in business: a business of public relations,” *Public Relations Review*, (Fall 1990): 19.

² Kirk Hallahan, “Public relations and the circumvention of the press,” *Public Relations Quarterly* (Summer 1994): 17.

³ Raucher, “Public Relations in business.”

“public affairs.”⁴ Others have tried to create a new code of ethics,⁵ eliminate the “pernicious habit” of using the nickname “PR” because of its confusing meaning,⁶ or challenge any “critical comment” made by media people or by acquaintances and business contacts.⁷

Traditionally, public relations practitioners have helped their clients improve their image, by using the mass media as a principal tool of their communication campaigns aimed at external audiences. To create, change, or reinforce a certain public image is part of the public relations practitioners’ mission. However, these practitioners have not entirely succeeded—neither in canceling out the negative perception of public relations, nor in creating a favorable image. Meanwhile, the public relations field has increased in its presence and influence over time, and the public relations career has achieved a degree of acceptance. Trapped in this in-between status, this issue continues to be discussed, and a conclusion has yet to be reached.⁸ The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to frame the popular press’ projected image of the public relations profession in the 1980s.

The public relations profession can be divided roughly into three time periods: its origins in the beginnings of the 1900s, its greatest advancement in the 1950s, and its special development and diversification in the 1980s, a period during which the public relations field, stimulated by Reaganomics, experienced its third great surge.

This study narrows the examination to the question of how print media covered the public relations field and portrayed the profession from 1980 through 1989. Specifically, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions: (a) How was the general image of the public relations profession presented in the print media during the 1980s, and (b) What did the print media articles specify as characterizations of the public relations field.

⁴ E.W. Brody, “We must act now to redeem PR’s reputation,” *Public Relations Quarterly*, (Fall 1992): 42

⁵ Susan Fry Bovet, “The burning question of ethics: the profession fights for better business practices,” *Public Relations Journal*, November 1993, 24

⁶ Sam Black, “I am proud to be in public relations,” *Public Relations Quarterly*, (Summer 1993): 45

⁷ Jim Pritchitt, “If image is linked to reputation and reputation to increased use, shouldn’t we do something about ours?,” *Public Relations Quarterly*, (Fall 1992): 45

⁸ Black, “I am proud to be in public relations.”

Although this paper will contribute to the analysis of the image of the public relations profession in the print media during the 1980s, its scope will obviously be limited. Beyond the capacity of this study, therefore, there will remain a need for a full investigation of the relationship of the general media coverage to audience perceptions of the public relations field.

Media coverage of public relations: Earlier studies

Only five previous studies were found that addressed the mass media's image of public relations practitioners. A study by Cline (1982) is related to mass communication textbooks; one by Keenan (1996) is related to television, and three by Bishop, Spicer, and Henderson. (1988, 1993, and 1998 respectively) are related to newspapers. Although two studies were found that related to the image of advertising practitioners in the mass media,⁹ they do not address the perception of the public relations practitioner or the profession as a whole.

A study by Cline analyzed the public relations image as portrayed in nine mass communication textbooks, all but one published after 1978. Her study explored the relationship between advertising and public relations, the history of public relations, and the expressed attitude of the textbooks toward public relations. Cline concluded that the negative image of public relations in textbooks would have consequences for future professionals: "If the public relations educators are willing to allow the propaganda to go unchecked, we must resign ourselves to another generation which views public relations as less ethical, less professional—but better-paying—than journalism, the profession responsible for *Jimmy's World* and the Washington Post's *Ear*."¹⁰

In another study, Keenan looked at network television news coverage of public relations. He examined how the three major broadcast television networks (ABC, CBS,

⁹ Linda M. Maddox, "The Image of the Advertising Practitioner as Presented in the Mass Media, 1900-1972," *American Journalism* 2 (1985): 117-129; Kevin L. Keenan, "Television News Coverage of Advertising: An exploratory Census of Content," in Charles S. Madden (ed.), *Proceedings of the 1995 Conference of the American Academy of Advertising*, (Waco, TX: American Academy of Advertising, 1995), 174-180.

¹⁰ Carolyn Cline, "The Image of Public Relations in Mass Comm Texts," *Public Relations Review* 8 (1982): 71.

and NBC) treated public relations, from 1980 through 1995. Keenan reached a *tentative* conclusion, pointing out that “network television’s coverage is more objective and less antagonistic toward public relations than coverage in the print media.”¹¹

Three studies that have looked at the issue of how the print media cover public relations include one by Bishop, one by Spice, and one by Henderson. Bishop, who conducted an electronic content analysis of three American newspapers over a one-month period (June 1987),¹² concluded that, in general, the majority of those stories were favorable in tone. He noted that “we can take comfort in the findings that publicity is generally considered beneficial. The only heavy negative for society occurred in the legal category, and much of that was due to three cases of pre-trial publicity.”¹³

Christopher Spicer conducted a study about media content both in newspapers and magazines.¹⁴ He found that the majority (83 %) of print items portrayed a negative image of public relations. Spicer pointed out the negative attitudes of reporters and editors toward the public relations profession.¹⁵

In 1998, Henderson conducted an analysis of 100 articles that appeared from 1995 to 1996 to look “at the way *public relations* is used in the popular press.” She analyzed the connotative meaning of the term “public relations” as used in those articles, the accuracy of that meaning, and the person who used the term. Henderson found a heavily negative connotation in the use of the term and concluded that “this does not bode well

¹¹ Kevin L. Keenan, “Network Television News Coverage of Public Relations: An Exploratory Census of Content,” *Public Relations Review* 22 (1996): 228.

¹² The newspapers were the following: the St. Petersburg (FL) *Times*, the Seattle (WA) *Times*, and the Little Rock *Arkansas Gazette*. Bishop found no mention of the term “public relations” in more than 16,000 stories. When he expanded his study to include the term “publicity,” he found 121 mentions.

¹³ Robert L. Bishop, “What Newspapers Say About Public relations in the Print Media,” *Public Relations Review* 14 (1988): 51.

¹⁴ Christopher H. Spicer, “Images of Public Relations in the Print Media,” *Journal of Public Relations Research* 5 (1993): 47-61.

¹⁵ The method used was based on an analysis of 84 examples, which included both terms *public relations* and *PR*. In his findings, Spicer established seven categories: distraction, disaster, challenge, hype, merely, war, and schmooze. The author stated that six of those seven categories identified were considered to be in some degree negative or unfavorable (corresponding to 83% of the examples), while just one was neutral or positive (17% of the items). The terms *public relations* and *PR* were subjectively defined as embedded in the print media by those seven categories. Thus, there was some evidence that the negative attitude of journalists influenced their use of those terms.

for the profession. Consistent with surveys of journalists, the implication is that they have a negative impression of the profession.”¹⁶

Although literature on this issue is scarce, the general picture of how the print media has presented the public relations profession is one of clear negative connotation, whereas the picture of television coverage has been less negative. It is possible, and perhaps even probable, that the former ties and close relationships between the print journalists and the public relations practitioners could be partially responsible for the print media’s more negative perception or at least their ambivalence.

Color of images: how the print media portrayed the profession

The present study involved both an on-line search via the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, and a content analysis of articles related to public relations in three American newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. These publications were somewhat arbitrarily selected as being representative of the media business and public relations professional activities in three principal US cities.

Although a first on-line search of this study found hundreds of articles published between 1980 and 1989 that mentioned public relations,¹⁷ the final selection consisted of only 58 items. This narrowing down resulted from hewing to the specific purpose of the study, namely to analyze just those articles talking about the image of public relations practitioners or of public relations as a profession. The 58 articles selected included only those with the words “public relations and practitioners” and “public relations and profession.”¹⁸ Of the 58 items from the three newspapers mentioned above, the largest

¹⁶ Julie K. Henderson, “Negative connotations in the use of the term ‘public relations’ in the print media,” *Public Relations Review* (Spring 1998): 55.

¹⁷ In this first search, the database gave results from 56 newspapers, 42 from the U.S. and 14 from other countries. Using the keyword “public relations,” the software located the following numbers of articles cited by year: 492 in 1980; 807 in 1981; 779 in 1982; 847 in 1983; 1,102 in 1984; 1,720 in 1985; 2,111 in 1986; 2,358 in 1987; 2,394 in 1988; and 3,612 in 1989. For comparison, 8,242 articles were found in 1999 and more than 2,400 in the first four months of the year 2000.

¹⁸ The path to conduct this search is as follows: once connected to Lexis-Nexis, select “News” and then “General News.” In the keyword, write “public relations AND practitioner.” The source is “Major newspapers,” from 1980 to 1989. The search retrieves 43 documents; among these, just 16 are from the three newspapers selected. The next step follows the same directions for the keyword “public relations AND profession.” It retrieves 68 documents; 45 are from the selected newspapers.

number appeared in 1989. This may mean that the issue has gained importance in the later period, a point that may be worthy of consideration for future research.

Titles, dates, and bylines of the 58 articles were analyzed for the purpose of this paper.¹⁹ All the 58 articles were coded as favorable, unfavorable, or neutral toward public relations as a profession. Coded as *favorable* were 14 items, or 24 %, which fitted into Henderson's category of "Public Relations Used Correctly":

This category includes citations in which "public relations" was judged to be used correctly in the sense that the Public Relations Society of America and other leaders in the public relations field define the term. These definitions usually include these elements: public relations contributes to mutual understanding among groups; develops relationships with publics; is a management function; acts in a counseling, mediating, translator function; involves two-way communication.²⁰

Also included as favorable were articles that portrayed any public relations practitioner or leader with a tone of respect or admiration, or that listed, explained or analyzed favorably the public relations' achievements or life in general. Any story about the development of the profession itself was considered favorable.

Articles suggesting that public relations was related to or associated with negativity such as deceit, fraud, cheating, trickery, amorality, manipulation, superficiality, weakness, or immaturity, as well as articles suggesting any pejorative connotation were classified as *unfavorable*. Table 1 shows that twenty-seven items (46.5 %) fall into this category.

Neutral articles (29.3 %) were those that portrayed the public relations with neither favorable nor unfavorable definitions, or that treated it like any other profession, without additional connotation. Generally, these articles had no more reference to the profession than just the mention of public relations. Articles that had a balance of both positive and negative aspects and could not be classified as either unfavorable or favorable were considered neutral.

¹⁹ Initially, the total articles were 61, but the search resulted in the 58 articles because three of them were repeated.

²⁰ Henderson, "Negative connotations," 48.

Table 1**Number of articles by year and number and percentage of categorization**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Articles</u>	<u>Favorable</u>	<u>Unfavorable</u>	<u>Neutral</u>
1980	3	2	1	0
1981	5	2	3	0
1982	7	3	2	2
1983	4	0	1	3
1984	4	1	0	3
1985	7	2	4	1
1986	6	0	2	4
1987	3	2	0	1
1988	9	1	7	1
1989	10	1	7	2
<hr/>				
Totals: 58 (100%)		14 (24.1%)	27 (46.5%)	17 (29.3%)

Positive images: good news

Public relations as a profession was portrayed favorably by the print media in just 24 % of articles during the 1980s. This study found that 14 articles fit into the category of favorable coverage. These 14 articles used the “correct” meaning of public relations and included some elements of its definition as: the contribution to mutual understanding among groups, improving communication with audiences, and/or functioning as a management profession. Also, articles that presented an image of development, respect, or admiration fell into this category. An example of this would be a story that appeared in print when the Public Relations Society of America was in the process of re-structuring its management in 1981. This article reported that Judith S. Bogart, then the Society’s secretary, had been nominated as president-elect: “That puts her in line to become president in 1983, the first woman to hold the office in a decade and only the second in the history of the organization, which was chartered in 1947. It now has more than 10,000 members and bills itself as ‘the world’s largest professional society for public relations practitioners.’”²¹

²¹ Eric Pace, “Advertising; Women In Public Relations,” *New York Times*, 11 September 1981, sec. D, 11.

It seems that the first years of Reaganomics were an optimistic era for the public relations field. Newspapers reported many changes, growth, new functions, and so on within the profession. In 1982, *The New York Times* published a letter from James K. Carroll, who complained about an article that had appeared two weeks before.²² In this story, Carroll defended public relations' role for the years ahead and explained the situation at that moment: "PR today is changing, becoming increasingly specialized, scientific, and accountable. In 1980, the term "Corporate Communications" replaced PR as the favored term among the largest companies for their communications departments."²³

Three years later, in 1985, Julian Myers agreed that these changes, particularly the explosive growth of the public relations profession, were taking place: "During the five years I have been teaching entertainment PR for UCLA Extension I have seen the size of my classes double. Moreover, large numbers of middle-aged people, mostly women, have determined to make complete life changes to get into this calling."²⁴ Myers noted that although the employment rate was growing in this field, the volume of aspirants was far greater than the available jobs.

Public relations was well covered in the 1980s, in the business, legal, and political fields. Half of the 14 favorable articles in this study were related to business or politics. In 1980, for example, one article reporting about the death of an apparently solid-citizen, Charles Frederick Moore, Jr., gave a favorable portrayal of him as a professional of the public relations field:

A public relations man by profession, Mr. Moore was a politician by avocation, and he was active on local, state and national levels. He served briefly as a special consultant to President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953 and 1954 and held local office in Orleans, Mass., where he had lived since retiring from Ford in 1963. He was a Republican, a 1925 graduate of Dartmouth College who was notably active

²² Jack Bernstein wrote the article referred to. This article was also selected as one of the 58 articles of this study; it was categorized as unfavorable. See Jack Bernstein, "Why P.R. Gets Flak," *New York Times*, 3 January 1982, sec. 3, 2.

²³ James K. Carroll, "More flak," *New York Times*, 17 January 1982, sec. 3, 4.

²⁴ Julian F. Myers, "Despite Boom, Applicants Far Outnumber Jobs in PR," *Los Angeles Times*, 31 March 1985, sec. Business, 3.

in alumni affairs, a farmer on Cape Cod like his father before him, and a baseball fan.²⁵

Other favorable articles discuss the good earnings, salary increases, greater demand for foreign image-making, high budgets, and new projects in the public relations profession. One story read: “Washington’s peculiar brand of PR is booming the way the legal business here did a decade ago. In some instances, PR firms are performing lobbying tasks that used to be carried out by the city’s high-powered law firms – which are beginning to use PR firms to boost their images, too.”²⁶

These favorable articles also included much material about new public relations firms, mergers, or business migration to the suburbs. Interviews with public relations people, or publication of some of their profiles was usual. A story about journalists going into the field of public relations, appearing in 1987, described two former business editors of the Gannett/Westchester Rockland Newspapers Group:

“The quality of the releases we were getting from PR firms drove us to do it,” Geoffrey Thompson said when asked why he and Mr. Bender decided to forsake journalism for public relations. “Seriously,” he continued, “I thought on and off about going into PR for several years. As someone in daily contact with the business community, who is constantly appalled at the low quality of the releases put out by the best companies. But the real catalyst was my age. I was 39, some 17 years with Gannett. Clearly if I was ever going to live out the fantasy of having my own business I had to move. And I figured who had a better in-depth knowledge of the area’s business and real-estate community than two guys with a combined 30 years of news media experience.”²⁷

Coincidentally, in the same county two years later, a group of public relations people created an executive network of 50 members who gathered monthly and participated in three workshops, “two business-oriented and one personal”:

“The recently formed Westchester Executive Network was created to enhance communications among people in all professions,” said Christine Hyler, who founded the organization with Kathryn White, owner of the Bancroft Group, a PR

²⁵ *Washington Post*, “Charles Frederick Moore Jr., Ex-Promotion Chief at Post,” 12 November 1980, sec. Metro, C7.

²⁶ *Washington Post*, “PR Gets Entrenched as A Washington Business,” 18 February 1985, sec. Washington Business, 1.

²⁷ Penny Singer, “Professional Services for Business,” *New York Times*, 27 September 1987, sec. 11WC, 12.

company in Peekskill. The group, which, despite its name, is not for executives only, aims to cut across professional boundaries among workers in a variety of fields and to help them establish new business contacts.²⁸

All 14 favorable articles were classified under three characterizations, regarding their portrayal of public relations: (a) as like any other profession, with connotations of professionalism, respectfulness, or seriousness (six articles); (b) as an advertising, communication, publicity or image profession (three articles); and (c) as a business, with economic or political power or influence (five articles). A breakdown of each type of characterization of all 58 articles is shown in Table 2.

The boldest color of these images: bad news

Even though the public relations field grew greatly during this period, the 1980s were not a time when newspapers presented only favorable coverage of this profession. Instead, this analysis found that almost half of the coverage (47 %) was unfavorable. Among the 27 articles categorized as unfavorable were those that portrayed the field in a demeaning or pejorative way, as well as those that gave the impression of public relations as a deceptive profession, or that questioned its ethics in any way.

A former spokesman for President Reagan, Larry Speakes, was a central figure in one of the most controversial articles about public relations in the 1980s. In 1988, in his book, *Speaking Out*, Speakes said that quotes and remarks that he had attributed to Reagan in the White House were actually made not by the President, but by others, including Secretary of State George Shultz and Speakes himself. Ron Rogers, president of Rogers & Associates, a Los Angeles-based public relations firm, cited this story: “The flap triggered by these disclosures prompted Speakes’ resignation from his \$250,000-a-year job as spokesman for Merrill Lynch & Co. More important, the Speakes affair has raised pointed questions about the ethical standards and practices of some in the PR industry.”²⁹

²⁸ Lynne Ames, “Executive Network Seeks Business Ties,” *New York Times*, 5 March 1989, sec. 12WC, 24.

²⁹ Ron Rogers, “Viewpoints; Speakes’ transgressions tarnish PR professional,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 April 1988, sec. Business, 3.

Rogers' article was just one among the 27 articles that were found to contain unfavorable coverage of the public relations profession. It is an interesting coincidence that Speakes' story took place in 1988. In this year and the following year together, during the end of President Reagan's second term and the end time period of this study, the greatest number of unfavorable articles (14) were published (see Table 1).

In order to examine this unfavorable coverage, the present study conducted a critical analysis of the four characterizations that were found in unfavorable articles, regarding their portrayal of public relations: (a) as a deceptive profession (14 articles); (b) as an immature, weak or superficial profession (seven articles); (c) as a discriminatory profession (four articles); and (d) as an intimidating, harassing or conflicting profession (two articles). Although it seems that there were fewer unfavorable characterizations than favorable and neutral ones, the fact is that almost half of all characterizations were unfavorable and, individually, one of the unfavorable categorizations ("as a deceptive profession") contained the most examples of all (see Table 2 below).

Table 2

Characterizations of articles, 58 (100%)

<u>Favorable or neutral</u>	<u>Articles</u>
A. As like any other profession	12 (20.7 %)
B. As an advertising, communication, publicity or image profession	12 (20.7 %)
C. As a business, with economic or political power or influence	7 (12.1 %)
Total:	<u>31 (53.5 %)</u>
<u>Unfavorable</u>	<u>Articles</u>
D. As a deceptive profession	14 (24 %)
E. As an immature, weak or superficial profession	7 (12 %)
F. As a discriminatory profession	4 (7 %)
G. As an intimidating, harassing or conflicting profession	2 (3.5 %)
Total:	<u>27 (46.5 %)</u>

Articles portraying public relations as a deceptive profession presented a context in which the connotations of words gave an unfavorable image of the field. These articles created the impression that public relations "must" or "should" use deceit, misrepresentations, stratagems or tricks in order to "help" people or organizations achieve some goals. In 1981, one journalist provided an example of this when she

reported on the newly appointed Deputy Director for Operations, John H. Stein, who had served for many years in the Central Intelligence Agency's clandestine operations:

His name does not appear in newspaper clippings or in "Who's who." Even the announcement today by the C.I.A. of his promotion was unusual because agency appointments to jobs in what is known as "the black side," or covert operations, are usually neither announced nor confirmed. The terse statement issued by the agency's public relations office described Mr. Stein only as a "career C.I.A. official."³⁰

In another story, the American Medical Association (AMA) accused lawyers of creating a "medical malpractice problem" which, according to the AMA, did not exist, whereas the American Bar Association (ABA) and its president, John C. Shepherd, argued that a malpractice crisis did exist. The unfavorable article describing this conflict stated the declaration of one lawyer in the following terms: "'The AMA is embarking on a massive public relations campaign to brainwash the American public,' said Charles Kramer, a longtime plaintiffs' malpractice lawyer in New York. 'The way to solve this crisis is for doctors to practice better medicine, not to reduce the rights of their victims.'"³¹

In 1985, Steven Meyerowitz described the increasing use of brochures as a public relations tool by many different types of businesses. This article began by illustrating how medical brochures offer services that would be beneficial for their future business to clients. Then, the article stated: "Lawyers and accountants have caught onto the same trick. Small firms that never had any printed brochures are ordering them now. And large firms that have had only general brochures in the past are printing new ones describing specific areas of their practices and sending them, often unsolicited, to existing and potential clients."³²

The references to specific unfavorable words or meanings in Meyerowitz's article were not an exception. The same year, an article was published that contained not only

³⁰ Judith Miller, "Man in the News; New Deputy for C.I.A.," *New York Times*, 15 July 1981, sec. A, 18.

³¹ David Margolick, "Medical Malpractice: Role of Lawyers," *New York Times*, 21 February 1985, sec. A, 16.

³² Steven A. Meyerowitz, "Brochures That Define a Special Niche," *New York Times*, 24 November 1985, sec. 3, 19.

connotations but also direct meaning regarding the “persuasive” and “negative” function of public relations. In a book review, Marjorie Marks discussed the book *The Persuasion Explosion*, written by Art Stevens. Commenting on the book’s analysis of historical public relations campaigns, she states:

For the rest of us, however, tales about the engineering of PR to affect our choices and beliefs can inspire the feeling that we are not altogether in control of our opinions; the power of persuasion as practiced by others on us has profoundly affected our sense of self-determination regarding even the most minor of matters. The choices we make about everything from who we choose to be our President to what we buy to feed our pets, we realize, are not made on the basis of our individual ingenuity but rather on criteria carefully selected and designed by others to elicit precisely the “choices” we ultimately make.³³

Other articles that portrayed public relations as a manipulative profession made use of words or phrases with unfavorable connotations, such as “crimes,” “ethical problems,” “betraying the truth,” “trickery,” “lying,” “hacks,” “inaccurate,” “misleading,” and “whitewash.”

In 1988, two cases emerged in which public relations practitioners sent letters to the *Los Angeles Times*—one pleased about one story, and the other complaining about a published article. Both of those letters fell into the unfavorable category, portraying the profession as deceptive. Although Roger Beck, a veteran of 26 years as a professional public relations counselor and a president of the Los Angeles Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America, did not have this intention, his letter gave readers an unfavorable impression of the practices of some people in the public relations profession. In the first of the two paragraphs, Beck wrote:

Tom Hanscom, whom you describe in the June 27 Footnotes column as “a guy who’s handling a tough PR problem at the San Diego Wild Animal Park,” is really going to know what a tough public relations problem is when his colleagues learn of his unfortunate “tongue-in-cheek” remark that “Being an astute and long-practicing liar, I’ve found my natural place in public relations.”³⁴

³³ Marjorie Marks, “Book Review; Persuasive Primer for the PR Careerist,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 December 1985, sec. View, 47.

³⁴ Roger Beck, “Trip to the Moon,” *Los Angeles Times*, 31 July 1988, sec. Business, 5.

Even though he argued, in the second paragraph, that he disagreed with Hanscom and considered it unnecessary “to lie” in performing the public relations function, these terms nevertheless placed this article in an unfavorable category.

In the second case, Sherman Oaks, a professional public relations practitioner representing legal associations and law firms, congratulated the editor for a published article related to the growth of public relations in the legal field. In the second paragraph of his two-paragraph letter, he asserted:

However, I hope that the statement about law firms hiring “a public relations firm with price tags of \$1,500 per press release” was a misprint. Not only will inflated figures like that frighten away 99 % of the law firms that might be even vaguely considering engaging in a program of marketing their legal services, but I can assure you that 99 % of the PR firms in this town could produce a press release announcing World War III or a cure for cancer for far less than \$1,500.³⁵

This quote implies that public relations practices will invent anything to obtain money. Whether Oaks was joking or not, his article fits without a doubt under the first unfavorable characterization of deceptive profession.

The second unfavorable characterization portrays the public relations profession as immature, weak or superficial. In a 1982 article entitled “Why PR Gets Flak,” Jack Bernstein began his story with a clearly unfavorable description of public relations as a profession:

TIME magazine reported not long ago that Jorge Batista, the son of Cuba’s late dictator, who currently attends modeling school and works as a runway model at fashion shows, would like to rule the island one day. Failing that, he said, “perhaps I can do public relations.” And, if experience is any indicator, he probably will do public relations, that is.³⁶

The next two paragraphs are even more critical. Bernstein makes a reference regarding the superficiality of famous people in show business, sports, and social arenas and their “talent” and relationship to the public relations profession. Although he is very critical about the way in which this discipline has been portrayed, he puts the blame on most of the profession’s practitioners. It is interesting to note that he is also president of Jack Bernstein Associates, a public relations firm.

³⁵ Sherman Oaks, “The Price of PR,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 November 1988, sec. Business, p.3.

³⁶ Jack Bernstein, “Why P.R. Gets Flak,” *New York Times*, 3 January 1982, sec. 3, 2.

But Bernstein was not the only person who suggested that there were weaknesses or immaturity in the public relations profession. Two more articles contributed to this notion. In 1983, Jack Eisen sent a letter to *The Washington Post* and stated in the first paragraph: “Syd Kasper, I’m ashamed of you. After all these years as one of Washington’s premier PR practitioners in the federal and the private sectors, you haven’t learned the differences between the ‘capital’ city and the ‘Capitol’ building.”³⁷ Even though that letter is directed to a particular person, it is the context and the connotation that make that story fall into this characterization.

The second article suggested some immaturity in the profession as a whole. Its first paragraph said: “ALTHOUGH the vogue in advertising is to speak of integrating communications, practitioners of PR, direct marketing, and advertising tend to remain apart, even antagonistic.”³⁸

In 1988, a letter sent to the *Los Angeles Times* went beyond this notion and not only portrayed some weaknesses in public relations, but even negated the possibility of its being a profession. This letter becomes even more interesting when we realize that the writer is also a public relations practitioner. In its second paragraph, the letter declared about one published article: “I have but one bone to pick: A major problem with the practice of PR is that it is NOT a profession – as much as the Public Relations Society of America would like to see it called one.”³⁹

The third unfavorable characterization is of public relations as a discriminatory profession. Among the four articles in this classification, two were related to women (1986) and two to minority hiring (1989). Don Oldenburg wrote about the annual Public Relations Society of America conference, where one of the topics was the relationship between the proportion of women in the field and salaries and job status. That report argued that a higher proportion of women in the profession would produce lower salaries

³⁷ Jack Eisen, “Public Relations, the Way it Is,” *Washington Post*, 29 May 1983, sec. Metro, B2.

³⁸ Randall Rothenberg, “The Media Business: Advertising; Promotional Agency Gets A Crossover,” *New York Times*, 1 September 1989, sec. D, 6.

³⁹ C. Peter Davis, “Who Said That,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 May 1988, sec. Business, 3.

and status. The story stated: “Women in PR and business communications are increasingly seen as communications ‘technicians’ rather than ‘managers.’”⁴⁰

The second story related to women had the following title: “About Women: Public Relations Field: ‘Velvet Ghetto.’” Janice Mall began her article explaining how women are discriminated against when they break into a professional field and succeed. The entire profession, she said, is then referred to as “female work.” Of course, wages and status decrease. In the second paragraph of her article, she wrote: “According to a new report released recently by the International Assn. of Business Communicators, the field of PR and business communications is in danger of going the way of teaching, nursing, and library science – fields with lower pay and prestige than professions with comparable skills and education-- simply because the jobs are held predominantly by women.”⁴¹

Two articles dealt with minority hiring and fell into this third category of unfavorable portrayal as a discriminatory profession. These two articles are related, too, because the second was in response to the first. In 1989, Bruce Horovitz began his article in the following manner: “People who work in public relations spend most of their time making everyone else look good. That is why it seems particularly peculiar that the public relations field – of all professions – has managed to so badly mangle its own image in one of the most sensitive areas of all: minority hiring.”⁴²

Although he stated later that those concerns were from the Public Relations Society of America and its president, John Paluszek, the story in general portrayed the profession unfavorably. In response to this article, one month later, Sherman Oaks sent a letter to the newspaper going further in the same direction: “The situation regarding the abysmal representation of minorities in public relations is unfortunately true. But I resent

⁴⁰ Don Oldenburg, “Women’s pay penalty; In Public Relations, \$1 Million Per Career,” *Washington Post*, 12 November 1986, sec. D5.

⁴¹ Janice Mall, “About Women: Public Relations field: ‘Velvet Ghetto,’” *Los Angeles Times*, sec. View, 8.

⁴² Bruce Horovitz “Marketing: Improving the PR Industry’s Image on Hiring; Trade Groups and Others Are Doing Something About Jobs For Minorities,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 August 1989, sec. Business, 7.

the implication that the fault lies with either the profession or its practitioners.”⁴³ Again, the author of this unfavorable story was himself a public relations practitioner.

In the last characterization of unfavorable articles, the fourth, two items were considered to portray the field as an intimidating, harassing or conflicting. One was published in 1982. It concerned the Reagan crackdown on legal aid and presented an unfavorable and conflicting context:

The main legacy of the factionalized Reagan board, even some of the president’s supporters say, was a public-relations debacle, an appearance of flailing away relentlessly at a program for the poor that has broad Congressional and public support. But Mr. Reagan’s feud with legal aid lawyers is also a paradigm of the ideological hostility that divides the President and his allies from people they consider troublemakers.⁴⁴

The second article was published in 1988. Paula Span wrote a story about the Schmertz Company, owned by Herb Schmertz, one of the most visible and powerful public relations practitioners in America, who led the communications area in Mobil Oil for nearly 20 years. Span remembered some of Schmertz’s most important moments in Mobil Oil and his tough relationship with the press:

Then there are those to whom Mobil was the Goliath with the \$30-million war chest and the press the victim. Ed Rothschild was director of the consumer group Energy Action during some of its wilder tilts with Mobil and a source in some of the stories Schmertz got most exercised about. “He used his clout and authority to intimidate and harass the press,” Rothschild charges. “To some extent, it worked. There are a lot of stories that didn’t appear because Herb Schmertz was so tough and effective.”⁴⁵

Neutral images

The last part of this analysis includes the neutral category of articles that portrayed public relations without favorable or unfavorable definitions. Basically, these articles had no reference to the profession other than the mention of “public relations.”

⁴³ Sherman Oaks, “Bruce Horovitz’ Story on Minorities in Public Relations Should Have Included All Colors,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 October 1989, sec. Business, 3.

⁴⁴ Stuart Taylor Jr. “Politics and Peaks Revive Reagan Fight On Legal Aid,” *New York Times*, 19 December 1982, sec. 4, 3.

⁴⁵ Paula Span, “Chronicles of the PR Warrior; Retiring Mobil Oil VP Herb Schmertz, Looking Back at His Press Battles,” *Washington Post*, 28 April 1988, sec. Style, C1.

The 1980s presented an era of more neutral than favorable coverage for public relations, although there is not a big difference between the number for the two (see Table 1). The 17 articles (29 %) that were found to be neutral made some reference to public relations in a general way. In 1982, three articles were published that mentioned the public relations profession much as they might mention any other. An article about a New York high school program said: “Students could sign for two of the nine career opportunity presentations by the companies in addition to attending workshops at which experts spoke about such fields as engineering, marketing and public relations, law, finance and insurance in energy-related companies.”⁴⁶

Some articles mentioned the phrase “public relations” in ways that had almost nothing to do with the principal story. One article, relating to a businessmen-jazz musicians group from New York who was going to play in France read: “ ‘The two-night concert is being sponsored by the Comite Interprofessionel des Vins Doux Naturels,’ said Leslie Lieber, the founder of ‘Jazz at Noon,’ who is a public-relations consultant and plays alto saxophone and pennywhistle.”⁴⁷

Other articles published information that referred to the financial aspects of the public relations business: “Robert K. Gray, founder of Gray & Company, the largest public relations firm in Washington, will soon take his company public through an initial offering of \$5.4 million in stock.”⁴⁸

From 1985 to 1989, there were several articles with a fair balance of opinion that made it impossible to classify them into the favorable or unfavorable categories. The last articles of this category merely mentioned the phrase “public relations” without any other reference to the field (e.g., “These dogs, of course, are just a sampling of Westchester’s entries at Westminster. Thelma Boalbey, public relations director for the Westminster

⁴⁶ Elizabeth M. Fowler, “Careers; Luring Youth Into Energy,” *New York Times*, 13 January 1982, sec. D, 17.

⁴⁷ *New York Times*, “Noon Band Set for Tour in France,” 16 July 1983, 13.

⁴⁸ Daniel F. Cuff, “Business people; Capital Practitioner of Public Relations,” *New York Times*, 23 January 1984, sec. D., 2.

Kennel Club in Manhattan, estimates that 'at least 150' dogs will be from Westchester and Putnam Counties. Westchester is big dog country," Ms. Boalbey said.")⁴⁹

Finally, all 17 neutral articles do contain this characterization because they portrayed the public relations field as they would have portrayed any other profession (without specification), as a communication or information field, or simply as a business (without any other characteristic). Neutral articles were classified as (a) as like any other profession, without any connotation (six articles); (b) as an advertising, communication, publicity or image profession (nine articles); and (c) as a business (two articles).

Conclusion

The overall general image of the public relations profession portrayed by the print media from 1980 through 1989 was unfavorable. This study found that 46.5 % of the coverage was unfavorable, whereas just 24.1 % favorable. That means that there was almost twice as much unfavorable coverage as favorable. Tentatively, we can say that this study adds strength to the argument that coverage of public relations by the print media was generally antagonistic.

This study also reveals that, although the general image the print media presented of public relations as a profession was unfavorable, most of the specific characterizations made by print articles were favorable or neutral. Those articles portrayed the field: as they would have portrayed any other profession (20.7 %); as an advertising, communication, publicity or image profession (20.7 %); and as a business, with economic or political power or influence (12.1 %).

On the other hand, this study found four unfavorable characterizations of the public relations profession. The field was portrayed by the print media: as deceptive (24 %); as immature, weak or superficial (12 %); as discriminatory (7 %); and as intimidating, harassing or conflictive (3.5 %). In this sense, print media did make fewer unfavorable characterizations (46.5 %) than favorable and neutral characterizations combined (53.5 %). Nevertheless, the most common single characterization of public relations was as a deceptive profession (24 %).

⁴⁹ Lynne Ames, "Westchester Weekly Desk," *New York Times*, sec. 11WC, 28.

As a final note, it was quite intriguing to see that a significant number of the unfavorable articles were written not by “practicing” journalists, but by public relations practitioners themselves. This means that much of the responsibility for causing the public relations’ image problem during the 1980-1989 time period rests not with journalists, but with public relations practitioners. A new study embracing the time period between this study’s analysis period (1980-1989) and the present date (2001) should examine whether the public relations image has improved. If not, and if the “blame” can still be assigned to the public relations practitioners, it would seem that much of the responsibility for correcting the public relations’ unfavorable image should be assigned to the public relations practitioners. To paraphrase the well-known proverb (New Testament, Luke 4-23) related to physicians, “Public relations practitioners, heal thyselfes.”

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