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*After 50 Years: The Value and Values of Public Relations*

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I am deeply honored to have been selected to present this annual distinguished lecture on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Institute for Public Relations. I can't claim to have been involved with public relations for those 50 years. When the then Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education was chartered in 1956, I was a teenager entering my first year in high school. Although I did write articles for my high school newspaper in Sulphur Springs, Iowa, the *Livewire*, I was much more interested then in my basketball career than in public relations. That career peaked when I scored 42 points in a game my senior year—a game my team, the Hawks, lost 72-49. Since that highlight game came toward the end of a 59-game losing streak, I quickly moved on from basketball to journalism and public relations when I enrolled at Iowa State University in 1960.

Although I have practiced public relations, I have spent much more of my life thinking about public relations than doing it. This may bring the phrase to mind, “Those who can, do, and those who can't, teach.” However, I believe the practice of public relations is in dire need of conceptualization (of theoretical thinking) about what public relations is, what its value is to organizations and society, and what its core values should be. Therefore, I come to you tonight as a proud conceptualizer who has spent a lifetime thinking about the answers to these core questions.

As is common with many public relations practitioners, I did public relations for several years before I thought about what it is. My first job in public relations came after my second year as an agricultural journalism major at Iowa State when I worked as a writer for the Iowa Agricultural Information Service. Like most beginning practitioners, my work consisted mostly of technical activities. During the summer of 1965, I wrote over 100 press releases about chickens. The poultry scientists loved me, and my supervisor praised me for my productivity. However, newspapers used only a few of the releases; and I doubt that my work contributed much to the success of the Poultry Science Department or to society.

I held a number of jobs in public relations during my days as an undergraduate and then as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin. Although I couldn't yet define public relations, I looked at it through the lens of rural midwestern values. My mother was a “do gooder” who worked hard on our farm but who spent much of her time helping others and developing community relationships through the neighborhood, extended family, friends, school,

and church. My Master's degree was in agricultural economics, where I studied what was then called the farm problem—characterized by overproduction and low farm incomes. I began to see public relations as a problem solver and believed that public relations departments could help government agencies, universities, and agriculturally related corporations solve the problems of their constituents. During my graduate years, I also read John Dewey's book, *The Public and Its Problems*, written in 1927. Dewey defined a public in terms of the consequences of human acts on others. He said: "...consequences are of two kinds, those which affect the persons directly involved in a transaction and those which affect others beyond those immediately concerned. In this distinction we find the germ of the distinction between the private and the public."

Subconsciously, however, I still defined public relations as "what public relations people do." What most public relations people do consists of a repertoire of technical activities. Thus, most people think of it as publicity, media relations, information campaigns, marketing support, or applied journalism. I didn't really start thinking about what public relations is or whether there were any theories to guide its practice until I started teaching it at the University of Maryland in 1969. Like many practitioners who go into teaching, I found that I had taught the students everything I knew about public relations after about three weeks. Then, not knowing what to teach for the remaining 12 weeks of the semester, I turned to the communication theories I had learned and developed as a doctoral student in mass communication. Those theories were helpful, but they weren't really public relations theories. Thus began my nearly 40-year quest to develop ideas unique to public relations that explain what it is, what its value is, and what its values should be.

"Value" and "values" are at the center of what I call the public relations idea. If we examine the intellectual history of public relations, we find that journalists, critical scholars, and most people in general have questioned the value and values of public relations. We must ask whether this criticism is based on a lack of understanding of what we do or whether it reflects the actual behavior of public relations practitioners. Most likely, the criticism reflects both. As public relations professionals, therefore, I believe we must articulate for our ourselves and for society what we do, why we do it, and what value it has for our client organizations and for society. Explaining the value and values of public relations, in turn, helps us to explain the ROI of public relations, suggests how the public relations function should be structured and conceptualized, and helps us to construct a positive ethical statement of what the public relations profession stands for—as Bill Nielson did recently in his IPR International Distinguished Lecture in London.

Simply put, I have come to understand public relations as a strategic management function that uses communication to cultivate relationships with publics that have a stake in the behavior of the organization—either because they benefit from or are harmed by what Dewey called the consequences of that behavior. Public relations has value to an organization because it provides publics with whom it develops relationships a voice in management decisions that affect them. If public relations provides publics a voice in strategic decision-making, management is more likely to make socially responsible decisions. Responsible organizational behaviors, in a reciprocal manner, improve the quality of relationships with publics.

Quality relationships have both financial and nonfinancial value because they reduce the costs of regulation, legislation, and litigation; reduce the risk of implementing decisions; and sometimes increase revenue. They also have the secondary effects of improving the reputation of an organization (what members of a public think about it) and reducing negative publicity because there are fewer bad behaviors for journalists to write about. The only way to “manage a reputation” is through managing the organizational behaviors that are reflected in that reputation.

If public relations is a process of cultivating relationships with publics, then the values of the profession should reflect a worldview that is likely to produce good relationships. I believe that the primary value of public relations is a simple one—a value I learned in the rural Midwest, that is embraced by most religions of the world, and whose absence has produced wars and civil unrest throughout human history. That value is concern for others as well as ourselves. It is reflected in what I have called the symmetrical model of public relations, which suggests that public relations should strive to balance the interests of publics with the interests of the organization.

Some critics argue that the interests of organizations and publics are incompatible. However, a great deal of research shows that organizations that interact with their publics responsibly are also the most successful—based both on financial and nonfinancial criteria. In addition, symmetrical public relations helps society at large by improving parts of the web of relationships that makes up society. The symmetrical value of concern for others as well as ourselves also makes public relations a profession. A profession, by definition, is concerned with the greater good as much or more than self-interest.

I hope you agree that what I have just said represents a vision for public relations that allows us to stand tall and take pride in our profession. Critical scholars who have challenged my thinking have argued that this vision is the product of one person’s idealistic, even utopian, imagination. I have been asked: “Does anyone really practice public relations this way?” Or, “Could an organization really practice this form of public relations?”

Since I am reflecting on the 50 years of public relations history shared by the Institute for Public Relations, I looked at the second edition of Cutlip and Center’s *Effective Public Relations*, which was published in 1958. I found the same vision reflected in the first chapter where they wrote: “Recognition of public as well as corporate or institutional responsibility is manifested in adoption of a public relations point of view. This can best be termed *public relations thinking*. Such thinking finds expression in this typical remark of a corporation executive: ‘At least half our time is taken up with discussing the repercussions of what we propose to do.’” Cutlip and Center then concluded: “*Responsible performance on the part of a corporation, governmental agency, or non-profit organization is the foundation of sound public relationships*” (p. 7).

This public relations idea, or what Cutlip and Center called public relations thinking, also has been articulated by the giants of our history:

- Ivy Lee told the Rockefellers to tell the truth “because sooner or later the public will find it out anyway. And if the public doesn’t like what you are doing, change your policies and bring them into line with what the people want.”
- Edward Bernays wrote that the public relations counsel serves “as a consultant both in interpreting the public to his client and helping to interpret his client to the public. He helps to mould the action of his client as well as to mould public opinion.”
- John Hill wrote: “It is just as important for company management to understand the problems and viewpoints of its employees, neighbors, and others as it is for these groups to understand the problems and viewpoints of management... It is an essential function of the public relations counsel to serve as a listening post for management.”
- Arthur Page said: “Corporate communications in every case is a management function. No corporate strategy should be implemented without first considering the impact of that strategy on external and internal publics. The corporate communication professional is a policy maker, not a publicist or solely the writer of annual reports.”

In his book on the history of public relations, *The Unseen Power*, Scott Cutlip identified Earl Newsom as a “pioneer of Grunig’s symmetrical two-way model.” In particular, Cutlip cited Newsom’s work with Ford Motor Company as a client. In 1949, for example, Cutlip said Newsom convinced Ford to agree to a pension plan for its employees in negotiations with the United Auto Workers. Chrysler refused to do the same and lost more than \$5 billion dollars in a strike that followed—strong evidence of the cost of poor relationships.

These giants provide exemplars of the vision of the value and values of public relations I have articulated. It’s entirely possible, however, that these practitioners were the exception rather than the rule. Cutlip concluded, for example, that the “main thrust of today’s public relations work is to set the public agenda through the dissemination of news or information... Most practitioners are employed—as they have been most of this century—to advance the interest of the employer by spotlighting the institution’s favorable news and softening or suppressing what would be unfavorable to the employer if it became known.”

W. Howard Chase, in a Hall of Fame speech to the Arthur Page Society in 1989, described a meeting in 1943 when he was the “freshman guest of an illustrious group” of public relations giants: John Hill, Tommy Ross, Pen Dudley, Carl Byoir, Harold Brayman, Earl Newsom, Claude Robinson, Paul Garrett, Bob Peare, Milton Fairman, and Arthur Page. When asked whether he thought public relations was a profession, Chase focused on the preoccupation of public relations with techniques when he said: “It seems to me if we concentrate on the tools, devices, and techniques of our trade, without regard for the social consequences of their use, we don’t have to worry about founding a new profession—we’re all members of the oldest one.” Chase then told the Page Society members that he perceived “a wider and wider gap between the genuinely elite professionals, represented in this room, and the hordes of communication technicians who are the little Sir Echoes of whoever pays them... The great ones of this

profession have always been active participants in policy formation and not the kite tails of decisions from which their judgment was excluded.”

Cutlip and Chase identified a gap between elite practitioners and the mass of tacticians and technicians who massage the media daily to make organizations and their products look good. Some theorists might say that the elite practitioners have a theory of the nature of public relations and its value and values whereas the mass of technicians fly by the seat of their pants or simply do what employers or clients ask them to do. I would say, in contrast, that both groups have a theory—just different theories. I believe there have been, and still are, two major competing theories of public relations both in practice and in the academic world. I call these approaches the symbolic, interpretive, paradigm and the strategic management, behavioral, paradigm. Pat Jackson used to describe these competing approaches when he distinguished his style of “behavioral public relations” from what he called “cognitive public relations.”

Scholars and practitioners following the symbolic paradigm generally assume that public relations strives to influence how publics interpret the organization. These cognitive interpretations are embodied in such concepts as image, reputation, brand, impressions, and identity. The interpretive paradigm can be found in the concepts of reputation management in business schools, integrated marketing communication in advertising programs, and rhetorical theory in communication departments. Practitioners who follow the interpretive paradigm emphasize publicity, media relations, and media effects. Although this paradigm largely relegates public relations to a tactical role, the use of these tactics does reflect an underlying theory. Communication tactics, this theory maintains, create an impression in the minds of publics that allow the organization to buffer itself from its environment—to use the words of organizational theorists—which in turn allows the organization to behave in the way it wants.

In contrast, the behavioral, strategic management, paradigm focuses on the participation of public relations executives in strategic decision-making to help manage the behavior of organizations. In the words of organizational theorists, public relations is a bridging, rather than a buffering, function. It is designed to build relationships with stakeholders, rather than a set of messaging activities designed to buffer the organization from them. The paradigm emphasizes two-way and symmetrical communication of many kinds to provide publics a voice in management decisions and to facilitate dialogue between management and publics both before and after decisions are made.

The strategic management paradigm, quite obviously, reflects the vision I have articulated for public relations thus far tonight. It is an approach that captures the ideals of the giants of public relations history and the most knowledgeable of today’s practitioners. The interpretive paradigm, in contrast, reflects the hopes of many of our clients and employers who prefer to make decisions in isolation from publics. It also represents the wishful thinking of many practitioners who hope to make a living, or to become wealthy, by being the “kite tails of decisions from which they were excluded”—to use Howard Chase’s words.

The idea that public relations should be strategic rather than tactical has become a buzzword today in professional circles. Too often, however, this desire is expressed by

practitioners guided by the symbolic, interpretive, approach. The desire to make the interpretive paradigm strategic rather than tactical also shows up in the discussion of measurement in public relations. For example, research firms have tried to establish that favorable media placements are correlated with the achievement of business goals such as sales, profits, or preferences of consumers. Others have tried to demonstrate that money spent on product publicity has a greater ROI than money spent on advertising.

In a forthcoming article, my Swiss friend and colleague, Francesco Lurati of the University of Lugano, distinguished between the strategic role of corporate communication in *defining* organizational objectives and its tactical role in *supporting* organizational objectives. He pointed out that practitioners of public relations are eager to assume a strategic role, but they typically define strategic public relations as communication that supports the implementation of organizational objectives that corporate communicators had no role in defining. In his words: “From this perspective corporate communication is considered strategic when it pursues objectives which are merely aligned with the corporate ones. The term ‘strategy’ does not change the tactical nature of the task communication fills. In other words, the communication function here makes no contribution to the defining of corporate strategy.”

If we truly want metrics that show public relations has value to an organization, the measurements required are deceptively simple. We should measure the nature and quality of relationships to establish and monitor the value of public relations. And we should evaluate public relations strategies and tactics to determine which are most effective in cultivating relationships. In his book, *Corporate Public Relations*, Marvin Olasky, a conservative critic of public relations, argued that before the invention of “public relations,” corporate executives engaged in “private relations” by being personally involved in the community and civic organizations. With the advent of public relations, which he equated with the interpretive paradigm, Olasky said that public relations practitioners intervened in this relationship to manipulate the media and to participate in camouflage techniques of supposed social responsibility to isolate executives from their publics. Olasky thus identified the importance of relationships in public relations. Today, we must use social, mediated, and cyber relationships as well as the interpersonal relationships of Olasky’s ideal time in the past. Relationships are the key to effective public relations, however, and they can be measured to show its value.

Although the idea that public relations should be a strategic management function was already in place 50 years ago, I believe that academic scholars have accomplished a great deal in the last 50 years to develop the body of knowledge necessary to truly put that paradigm into practice. In their 1958 edition, Cutlip and Center quoted Earl Newsom, who said: “We need to remind ourselves continually that it is not our job to tell managements what they may or may not do, but to develop a science that will guide them in their judgments.” Since then, I believe we have built such a science.

We have done so, in part, by studying other disciplines. I have built my theories, for example, by searching for the role of public relations in theories of social and cognitive psychology, organizational theory, strategic management, organizational communication, and interpersonal relationships. I have not been content to accept the status quo in public relations as

all it can be. Nor have I been content to accept what scholars in these other disciplines think public relations is—which generally reflects the symbolic, interpretive paradigm. Rather, I have searched for gaps in the thinking in these other field to identify the role of public relations in strategic management.

Many public relations professionals today still advocate studying business and social science theories to prepare for public relations work. In 1958, Cutlip and Center asked: “How much specialized knowledge have practitioners contributed to the art of human relations and communication? Are not the scientific methods and procedures borrowed from the social sciences of psychology, sociology, economics, history, and journalism enough? Can practitioners be hitch-hikers and still lay claim to the title of professional?” Cutlip and Center answered in the negative: “We don’t know enough.” Today, I think we know a lot more about how to practice public relations for the good of organizations and society. We are no longer hitch-hikers. We have our own theories.

In his book, *Acres of Diamonds*, Russell Conwell, the founder of Temple University, provided many examples of people who did not have to travel widely to find diamonds.<sup>1</sup> For example, a farmer in Pennsylvania sold his farm to get the money to search for oil in Canada. The farmer who bought the land then found he owned the famous Pennsylvania oil field. We don’t have to travel to other disciplines to find our diamonds. Public relations is an important discipline if you’re good at it. So get to be good at it. Join with the Institute for Public Relations to support research and education and learn to use that research in your work. If public relations continues to develop as a learning profession for the next 50 years, I believe society will look at it then not as a deviant profession but as an institution that has helped organizations, publics, and society develop harmonious relationships with each other.

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Frank W. Ladwig, my wife, Lauri’s, uncle and a former sales executive at Burroughs Corporation, for this idea.