

Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education
Lecture to the Public Relations Society of America
Chicago, Illinois
November 18, 1968

“Time’s Arrow and the Fifth Estate”

*G. Edward Pendray
Senior Partner
Pendray & Company*

It is no small honor to be asked to deliver the annual Foundation Lecture, and I am impressed by both my responsibilities and my inadequacies.

When I began to consider what I should say to you, my first impulse was to recount the history and achievements of our profession, perhaps injecting some helpful words of wisdom distilled from my long practice in it. But when I fished my consciousness for whales of wisdom, I found the pool stocked exclusively with minnows. So, in the end I have avoided both history and self-conscious wisdom and instead of looking to the past, I am going to look to the future.

I have chosen to call my paper "Time's Arrow and the Fifth Estate." Time's Arrow, because it is a symbolic reference to the future -- the direction in which history accumulates, men and things grow old, systems and institutions prosper or decay. The Fifth Estate, because it is a symbolic, though perhaps somewhat ornate, reference to our profession. The complete title well serves my purpose if it suggests that public relations is a profession in evolution: in transition toward greater stature, greater responsibility, a larger place in society -- or possibly toward retrogression and extinction.

We are meeting together in stirring and troubled times. We have just passed through a national election of unusual import for our country. We are shocked and stunned by the prevalence of violence and crime in our cities, by intemperate protests and demonstrations, by dissensions and conflicts in our society and by world-wide turmoil.

In the next forty years -- in just a single professional lifetime -- the world will undergo such changes as to make it unrecognizable to us who are gathered here this noontime in November 1968. These changes will be brought about by many influences. Every member of our profession should be especially aware of two of these forces; we should watch them alertly, study them closely and assess them objectively.

What are these underlying powers that are altering the world? Not politics, not race relations, not communism or any other ism, not the threat -- or the reality -- of armed conflict. Despite their importance, these are all, in a sense, only symptoms and surface indications. The truly basic forces that shape the world -- and have long shaped it -- are science and technology, plus, of course, the complex social changes that flow from them. Of these latter, the most significant for our profession is the increase -- more graphically, the explosion -- of the earth's population.

Now, if this pronouncement seems to you pretentious, or unsurprising, or oversimplified, or possibly even hackneyed, please suspend judgment until we look more carefully. It is not necessary to be strikingly original to disclose basic truth. Elvis Presley, contrary to ordinary belief, did not invent the human pelvis, or even for that matter, discover it. But he did something for it just the same. The designer of the first mini-skirts did not originate the knee and lower thigh. These were already in existence, but who would have known? Similarly, it is true I am not the original discoverer of the social effects of science and technology. But in relating them to the future of our profession, I may nevertheless have elevated them to a new plateau of significance.

What is called *science* is simply the rapidly growing body of objective knowledge about the nature of our astonishing universe. It is turning out to be far different from the folklore and myth about the universe that we learned as children. Since most of today's customs and institutions are based on ideas derived from that folklore, our increasing scientific knowledge tends to change attitudes, to modify philosophical, moral, religious and political credos, and to break down old systems and established loyalties. Slowly or rapidly -- sometimes in fits and starts -- the institutions and ideas of the past are thus being reshaped.

Technology, the other primary force that shapes the world, is related to science insofar as the one takes advantage of the discoveries of the other. But technology is far older than science -- and more productive of social change. It was the principal driving force in our evolution from apes to men, a process that began ages ago with the invention of weapons and tools. In a rising crescendo of discovery, these early innovations were followed by fire, agriculture, the wheel, the harnessing of wind and water, the invention of gunpowder, chemistry, medicine, the internal combustion engine, autos, aircraft, electric power, electronics, computers, communications satellites and the whole complex of modern life.

The rapid pace of technology continues now faster than ever before. Since World War II, it has rushed ahead at a dazzling rate. Innovations appear with such rapidity that even experts are pressed to keep up with them. As a result, the world is inexorably changing with every breath we take. Change was once merely a transition from one steady state to another -- something to be lived through with patience and fortitude. Now it is itself a way of life.

The results of man's amazing inventiveness at first seemed altogether good. In the Nineteenth Century, they led to the hopeful idea that change is synonymous with progress. Man was considered perfectible and it seemed that through technology his life on earth could be made perfect, too. More people began to have more things. Natural enemies were controlled or eliminated. Disease and pain began to be dealt with. More babies survived to adulthood. More mature people lived into old age.

But when good enters human experience it usually demands some payment. A mounting toll of evils also commenced to appear as byproducts: noise, crowding, social insecurity, air and water pollution, the extinction of wild animals, and the end of open lands, soil erosion, the using up of metals and other irreplaceable materials, limitations on personal freedom, regulation of almost everything and kindred ills.

In particular, the human race, long held in check by the normal balances of ecology, seemed suddenly to escape all natural controls. "Be fruitful and multiply," said the Lord and Adam's descendants took the directive most literally. The world's population today is three billion -- almost triple what it was only a century ago. By 1980, say United Nations estimates, it will be four and a quarter billion; by 1990, over five billion; by the year 2000 -- just 32 years from now -- six and a quarter billion.

The momentum of population is such that these predictions are as certain as tomorrow, unless there is a natural catastrophe, or atomic war, or a prompt reversal of world attitudes toward birth control. When today's teenage children reach the age of fifty, the population of the earth will have doubled. By the time they are dead, it will have tripled.

Some have proposed to deal with the excess population by rocketing the annual increment to other planets. At first glance it seems a happy solution. But the yearly increase at present is about 70 million. If the proposed space ships could carry 1,000 passengers per takeoff, an expendable fleet of 70,000 would be needed to handle the human excess of just a single year. Transporting all these earthlings to happy homes elsewhere would require continuous blast-offs at the rate of one every seven minutes, day and night, month after month.

Should you be thinking that the rest of the world -- but not America -- will get overcrowded, a review of the U.S. figures may startle you. Our present population is a little over 200 million -- nearly ten times what it was 150 years ago. The Census Department predicts that by 1990 there will be 300 million Americans, and by 2000, there will be 360 million.

As things are now going, one new American is born every ten seconds. While you have been sitting here listening to me, a group of Americans, more productively engaged, has added new population approximately equal to the number of us in this room.

You may view this enormous increase with foreboding, if you like -- or you can see it as one more challenge to the human race, which has successfully met many challenges in its time and will no doubt meet this one successfully too. Everything so far proposed, including the birth-control pill, has failed to check this growth; yet we know that something always keeps the trees from growing through the sky. Sooner or later the forces of nature and necessity will step in -- though perhaps painfully -- to bring the population into balance again.

I have gone into the matter of the population explosion at some length, because it is, in my opinion, the one most significant event confronting the nation, the world and the profession of public relations. As human beings, we public relations people will, of course, share the common fate, whatever that may be. But, as professionals in dealing with people -- as facilitators of change and relievers of social friction -- we shall also be called upon to play a more active role, in events the complexity of which we can only dimly imagine; events that will profoundly affect the future development, evolution and success of our profession -- and perhaps of our civilization.

For that reason, it is of the utmost importance for every one of us to begin now to analyze carefully what effects the human explosion will have -- on ourselves, on the customs,

institutions, and beliefs that we feel are right and good, on our communities, on our industries, on our jobs and on our profession. This is a searching examination every professional must undertake -- on his behalf, on that of his employer or clients, and in the public interest.

To do this adequately, it will be important to study not only the overall figures, but also the specific details, for population growth will not occur evenly. It will be strongly patterned and will affect different institutions and geographical areas in different ways. Gigantic cities, bigger than anything we can imagine today, are already beginning to take form on the eastern seaboard, in the Chicago-Detroit area, in the Lake Ontario region, on the West Coast, and elsewhere. The age-pattern of the population is changing. The reign of older people will soon be waning; there will be more teenagers and young adults. Racial and minority patterns are also shifting: the ratio of non-whites to whites, for example, is on the rise. The trends themselves will be changing, too.

Some companies and industries have already begun serious examinations of population growth and change, mostly as these may affect sales. But, in my opinion, sales will be among the least of the concerns of the future. More to the point will be relations with consumers, with employees, with communities, with minorities and dissidents, with pressure groups, with local, state and national government -- and with what might be called considerations of magnitude, scale and method.

There is probably no institution or business today that is big enough, responsive enough, perceptive enough, or has developed the techniques, the personnel or the resources that will be needed to deal with all the people who soon will be making demands upon it. Those who use commuter trains, buses, airlines or highways are already aware how unbearably crowded they are at rush hours. What will transportation be, 10 or 20 years from now? And what will its public relations problems be?

Other institutions are in a similar plight. The stock exchanges must shut down at intervals to allow the paperwork to catch up. The post office adds zip codes to all our other unrememberable numbers, just to provide the often unsatisfactory service we now receive. The telephone company plays its own version of the numbers game to 10 digits, just to connect one person with another. And government further tags each of us with a delightful nine-digit mathematical moniker, as a means of tracking us down to collect our taxes, to supply our Social Security, to allow us to invest in H Bonds or to sign us up for Medicare.

The time may come when every child at birth will have to be tattooed with his own personal identification number, in which will be coded his Social Security number, telephone number, zip code, auto license number, credit card number, passport number, bank account number, state lottery ticket number, computer index retrieval number -- and who knows -- the number that selects his job, chooses his mate, regulates the size of his family and designates his final pass to heaven.

Our profession, as the art and science of dealing with people, will in the future have no lack of raw material for its practice. There will be plenty of people. There will also be an unparalleled need for the skills, knowledge and perceptions of qualified public relations practitioners. Managements of every kind of institution will be clamoring for the services of those who can

effectively interpret them to their publics, interpret their publics to them, and suggest wise courses of action through swirling social seas. It will be a time teeming with public relations problems and a time rich in public relations opportunities -- provided we are ready. And if we are not ready, it could be a time of disaster.

To prepare for this future challenge, we must begin by examining our professional practices with a careful and critical eye. We shall have to sharpen our techniques, increase our knowledge and skills, broaden our understanding of everything that affects our professional performance and turn to new sources for strength and knowledge.

Among these sources are the several other professions that have influence over or share an interface with ours. These include professional management, personnel management and the legal profession, among others. We need to build bridges of mutual understanding and support with all of these.

We also need more dependable access to the know-how and experience of successful people in our own field. This will call for better public relations education, for a more professional literature. It will call also, I believe, for the accumulation of an annotated, indexed and truly sophisticated body of objective public relations case histories. Good case histories have long been in demand. But so far, too few have been sufficiently objective, or sufficiently complete, to serve as dependable guides for professional work.

Beyond these needs there is still another I believe will be vital to our continued success. *We need to greatly increase the scientific content of our body of knowledge.*

Many public relations people proceed today as if the great world of science and technology did not exist. Yet, as science and technology are the basis of change -- and as we are caught up in, and must necessarily operate in, an atmosphere of change -- we can no longer safely maintain a state of innocence about what is going on in those areas.

Familiarity with the physical sciences can give us background, insights and foreknowledge obtainable in no other way. And knowledge of another kind of science -- behavioral or social science -- can have the most direct and fundamental bearing on our daily work and accomplishments.

Thirty-three years ago, in 1936, Dr. Alexis Carrel published a widely discussed book, "Man-The Unknown." In it he pointed out how little was then understood about either the biology or the spirit -- that is to say the behavior -- of man. As you may remember, Dr. Carrel was famous for his research at the Rockefeller Institute, where for the first time he succeeded in growing heart tissue in artificial medium. As a young science reporter, I once saw that grayish bit of living heart: it was pulsing eerily in its non-living, sterile dish -- and it seemed to me that we were on the threshold of wonders. We were, indeed. Today, so much is known about the biology of living tissue that hearts and other organs can be transplanted from one individual to another. And recent discoveries about DNA, the genetic material in cells, have disclosed the very fundamentals of heredity, and laid bare the ultimate chemistry of life itself.

But when it comes to the spirit of man -- his emotions, motivations and behavior -- far less progress has been made. Social scientists are hard at work and every public relations professional should follow them closely. It must be admitted that from a practical point of view, their results have so far seemed disappointing, but this will not always be so. Basic knowledge of human behavior is so urgently needed today that this must surely be the next great field of intensified worldwide research, calling for substantial government and foundation support, and justifying an organization and scale rivaling the effort that produced the atom bomb, or brought the space program into being.

Worth noting also is the rise of new voices in the sciences of behavior -- voices that carry much promise. These include the ethologists, who are studying behavior in animals and men by new methods, and have already disclosed much useful new information about aggression, warfare, mating, family formation and other familiar behavior, and who seem to be developing a widely applicable pattern of basic "laws" that potentially could add new dimensions to the practice of public relations.

In the development of our profession to date, we have of necessity leaned heavily for guidance on intuition, on folklore and on common sense. These have stood us in good stead, as the survival of the profession proves. But in days to come, they alone will not be good enough. We must also have solid science to support us, as biology and biochemistry support the physician, and the laws of physics the engineer.

None of the things I have been describing, however, can by themselves assure our future success. Neither knowledge, nor skill, nor perceptiveness, nor science makes a great profession. A great profession is made by people. You yourselves, and the coming generation that will be recruited to this calling through your excellence, integrity, knowledge, achievements, and high example -- these are the real hope of our future.

In the coming evolution of public relations, my own role will be small. Time's Arrow flies swiftly forward. I have been a practitioner of this art now for over 40 years and my time on this professional stage is drawing to its close. But you who are younger: I send you forth into the time to come with full confidence -- confidence that you will continue to succeed; that you will add new dimensions to our calling; that you will indeed make public relations a true Fifth Estate in our society.

I envy you your opportunities -- and I wish you all the best.