

BOOK REVIEW

Public Relations History: Theory, Practice, and Profession

Reviewed by
Christopher McCollough, Jacksonville State University

Public Relations History: Theory, Practice, and Profession

Author: Cayce Myers

Routledge, 2021

ISBN: 978-1-138-49140-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-49141-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-351-03301-5 (ebk)

As is common practice, before sitting down with Myer's (2021) historical text on the development of modern public relations, I considered his stated goal for the work:

In this book I set out to provide an overview of where public relations history is today, and, to a greater extent, provide a historiography of public relations. While this book attempts to do all of that, it also serves as an overview of the origins of public relations as an action and as a practice (p. x).

Myers also adds a comment all too familiar to many public relations practitioners, scholars, and educators alike, "In doing this, I found that public relations history, like the history of any profession and practice, is multi-layered and not nearly as compartmentalized as I had previously thought" (p. x). In this sentence, Myers sets the tone for a complex, comprehensive history of our field's development and growth that is so rarely addressed in contemporary introductory texts, or effectively covered

in undergraduate or graduate classrooms.

Structure and Organization

To understand what makes the work different, one needs only examine the organization of the work. Myers begins by considering the diverse spectrum of definitions of public relations that we have in our discipline, and the issues related to those definitions: (1) whether PR should be defined by practice or by the act of doing public relations work, (2) how public relations definitions of professional practice affect the narrative of PR history, and (3) the impact of individuals on the field, and how PR history coalesces around the personal narratives of the so-called great men and women of PR. Made clear in recent studies on the community building actions of pioneer women on the Oregon Trail (Pompper, 2020), and a rich history on the early corporate communication and public relations actions of AT&T seeking to maintain its monopoly during the first half of the twentieth century (Russell, 2020), public relations educators need to strive to provide a more nuanced perspective on the historical development and evolution of public relations. For too long, it has been married to the early efforts of P.T. Barnum, Ivy Lee, and Edward Bernays and firmly anchored in the continental United States. Myers advances this call in his approach to articulate key industry pioneers and contributors that have often been absent in our foundational texts on the field. The same conscious, thoughtful consideration applies in reading his discussion of various definitions and their impact on our historical interpretation of the field.

Myers then walks the reader through the historical development of public relations theory, breaking down the four models as dominant forms of practice in different eras of the twentieth century (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). What sets his work apart in this process is how he moves from a thorough discussion of the historical eras to a consideration of some

essential critiques that help the reader properly contextualize the strengths and weaknesses of the four models, setting up the call for a critical consideration that improves our historical understanding of the discipline as we move through the 21st century.

Moving beyond the definitional and theoretical aspects of public relations, the rest of the text is organized into 10 easily digested chapters that cover the practice of public relations in key niche areas of practice. Included in the volume are political public relations (Chapter 3), propaganda, public relations, and public opinion (Chapter 4), public relations, propaganda, and conflict (Chapter 5), public relations in non-profits, education, and religion (Chapter 6), corporate public relations (Chapter 7), entertainment and the creation of the PR professional (Chapter 8), public relations ethics, organizations, and credentialing (Chapter 9), and the future of the history of public relations (Chapter 10).

As the list of specific areas of practice indicates, Myers is committed to presenting a more thorough understanding of the discipline. For example, he is to be commended for taking on a more holistic exploration of propaganda, its rise and application in a variety of contexts, and how it has informed the practice and perception of public relations as a modern discipline. Further, while we have seen references to the entertainment industry as fundamental to the emergence of the public relations professional, Myers offers a much deeper consideration of press agency and publicism as professions in the era and how the culture of the period informed the early development of public relations professionals.

This deeper examination of public relations foundations sets up a thorough examination of the cultural influences and larger philosophical matters related to the practice of public relations in the text in the final chapters.

An invaluable discussion is his consideration of how corporate public relations, the rise of government regulation in post-World War I America, and the law all played a critical role in how public relations cultivated various codes of ethics, professional organizations, and its modern systems for professional and academic accreditation. Myers closes the piece with a renewed call for historians in public relations to ensure they avoid narrow considerations of the historical origins and development of public relations, and instead develop a critical, thorough understanding of public relations development and relationship to other fields and industries that have shaped its practice.

Contribution to Public Relations Education

The text offers educators and scholars alike a reconceptualization of our discipline that can enhance the study of public relations history moving forward. Readers should note the text is one that can be easily accessible to educators, scholars, and industry professionals interested in learning more about the discipline and setting a foundational understanding of the state or historical research in public relations. Pedagogically, this book is an invaluable tool for those preparing to teach the introductory public relations course, and a useful set of readings for a graduate level course in public relations foundations.

In summary, Myers offers the discipline an invaluable tool that will help aspiring professionals, educators, and scholars develop a firm grasp on the development of our discipline, and how we need to consider its study as we look for new areas of historical analysis. Educators should see this as a resource to make the history chapter and discussion a richer experience for their students, and those working on introductory texts should read Myers and use it to inform their approach to discussing the foundation of our field. Current and past students of the discipline should appreciate

the volume for offering a complex, multi-layered consideration of public relations that is by no means as compartmentalized as Myers himself had initially assumed.

References

- Grunig, J. & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing Public Relations*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Pompper, D. (2020). *Community Building and Early Public Relations: Pioneer Women's role on and after the Oregon Trail* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429274718>
- Russell, K. M. (2020). *Promoting Monopoly: AT&T and the Politics of Public Relations, 1876-1941* (1st Ed.). Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b16633>