First impressions: US media portrayals of public relations in the 1920s

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Abstract

Purpose  
The paper traces negative and limiting media depictions of public relations (PR) to their origins in the 1920s in order to determine whether modern media characterizations of “public relations” are new or a legacy of the past.

Design/methodology/approach  
A qualitative content analysis was used in order to look more deeply at media characterizations of public relations. *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine were chosen to sample because of their dominance and unique reflection of the era, respectively.

Findings  
Reporting about “public relations” was primarily fair. Early practitioners were often quoted defining the profession, including “great men” of PR history and more common practitioners. These practitioners of PR are as much to blame for confounding the terms “public relations” and “press agent” as are the media of the 1920s.

Practical implications  
This historical study sheds a light on and provides context for both the media and society's understanding of public relations today.

Originality/value  
While much research has looked at media portrayals and public perceptions of the public relations field, few if any have traced attitudes about the profession to the decade when the term “public relations” was first popularized. The paper remedies this deficit.

Keywords  
Public relations  
Public opinion  
Mass media  
Culture

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JAMES ELLSWORTH established the public relations program of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company in the early 1900s, working closely with THEODORE VAIL (left), AT&T's consumer-minded founder. Ellsworth's activities led to support by the public for the concept of a private monopoly operating with government regulation in the public interest. HENRY FORD in the first decade of the 1900s was the first major industrialist to make extensive use of two basic public relations concepts – positioning and accessibility to the media. DENORA ‘DENNY’ GRISWOLD founded Public Relations News, the first newsletter about public relations. She also operated her own public relations agency with her husband, GLENN GRISWOLD. The Relationship between Media and Crime & Media Portrayals of Criminals Based on Age, Gender, Ethnicity & Social Class People have always been fascinated by crime and deviance despite the fact that it is always condemned by them. The content exhibited by the mass media proves just how much this insatiable interest in crime by these mass societies have become. An initial step was taken in the 1920s and 1930s by social scientists, particularly by psychologists who developed the theory of media effects. This research was initiated from the foundations of Lasswell's (1927, 1930, 1935) work which he believed that based on World War 1, "propoganda is one of the most powerful instrumentalities in the modern world" (p.220).