

“Public relations today is horrible. Any dope, any nitwit, any idiot can call him or herself a public relations practitioner” Edward Bernays, 1991. Is he right?

The public relations (PR) and communications industry is constantly changing, as is the media landscape, today with more of a focus on digital platforms and use of social media in communications strategies. It would be like comparing two different professions to compare the PR industry of today to that 16 years ago. Firstly, Bernays – referred to in his obituary as “the father of public relations”ⁱ – practiced propaganda, which in today’s industry is recognised as entirely different to PR; an unethical and misleading form of communication. Practitioners are encouraged to be transparent and principled, values upheld by industry bodies, including the PRCA and CIPR.

Social and digital media are having a powerful impact on today’s industry and on the role of practitioners. Bernays said: “people just use public relations as a euphemism for press agency. A firm sends articles or press releases to newspapers to win favour for a client”ⁱⁱ, whereas practitioners of today would argue that the profession requires so much more. Social media allows organisations to communicate directly to their audiences, a shift in communications that has added another dimension to the practice. It presents more opportunity for owned media, content that you are in control of, as opposed to leaving the task of sharing messages in the hands of journalists. Because of this, the industry has evolved into one which provides more targeted, strategic and effective communications across a wider number of channels. In Bernays’ time, the profession mainly centred around media relations, with less platforms to utilise. The CIPR State of Profession 2017 reportⁱⁱⁱ lists 21 different skills and tasks on its list; a considerably different job than “[sending] articles or press releases to newspapers.”

The PRCA was founded in 1969 and the CIPR in 1948 and so the industry began to be shaped into a profession with morals, theory and regulation, and is said to have evolved from a series of “press agents or publicists” into a credible and ethical practice in 1980s.^{iv} However, another shift in perception of the industry occurred in the 21st Century when PR began to be considered by many as closely related to spin – “the sophisticated selling of a specific message that is heavily biased in favour of one’s own position and that employs maximum management of the media”^v – a stigma which industry bodies and practitioners alike are now trying to eradicate. In fact, Bernays was dubbed by some as a ‘spin doctor’, although the term was most often reserved for political bias. However, it is again the introduction of social and digital platforms that has helped to change this, giving people direct access to information at its source. Commentators like American Democratic campaign worker Joe Trippi suggested that “modern internet activism spells the end for political spin.”^{vi}

Some may argue that the statement is true as there are no essential qualifications or accreditations required for someone to work in PR. Bernays himself was not a technically trained PR practitioner, which may have formed some basis of his comment. With a degree in agriculture and a background in journalism, he came into the profession through experience, not through PR qualification. This is common practice nowadays, with research suggesting the number of journalists looking for a career in PR has gone up 100% year on year, the number of PR people now exceeding the number of journalists^{vii}. This is little surprise considering the correlation between the skills sets of journalists and PR practitioners. Bernays taught the first PR course at New York University in 1923^{viii} and the course has been run at universities across the globe since then making it a widely studied course, however a degree is not essential for a practitioner to work in the industry.

To some, this lack of essential entry requirement impacts the credibility of the profession. Yet, although there is no requirement for specific qualification, the 2016 PRCA Census revealed that 64% of those in the industry have undergraduate degrees, increasing to 77% in the 18-24 age bracket^{ix}, indicating that many a practitioner has, in fact, invested in some sort of training and development. The PRCA and other industry bodies actively encourage continuous professional development and regular training, suggesting that although training and qualifications aren't essential, they are useful.

What must be considered is why the industry has this reputation; why might Bernays' statement be considered relevant? With organisations and industry bodies striving for professionalism, promoting best practice and managing the reputation of the industry itself, one would hope that this perception will soon be no more. Yet, cases of bad practice are still common and it is up to industry bodies and practitioners alike to identify, penalise and discourage malpractice to bring more credibility to the industry, eradicating the perception that "any dope" can be a practitioner and moving further away from the ideas of spin and propaganda to a more accurately defined profession. Industry-wide, practitioners find that the general knowledge and impression of PR does not reflect the true practice, indicating the industry has perhaps been tainted by the days of spin and propaganda.

So, I believe Edward Bernays was right, however only for the industry that he knew at the time. As the profession has changed so much since 1991, it is impossible to compare it to the industry we see today. Today's industry requires more skill and expertise and, despite the fact that there are no specific qualifications required to practice, it takes a certain knowledge base and a certain person to be a successful, effective and moral practitioner. Nowadays, it takes a lot more than any dope, nitwit or idiot to provide outstanding results and to help the organisation not only achieve their communications objectives, but to support their business objectives too.

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References:

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- ⁱⁱⁱ [CIPR – State of the Profession 2017](#)
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